**Petty Torments**

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# Petty Torments

by DBMars

Summary

Will Graham is dating Dr. Chilton, specifically to piss off Hannibal Lecter. Hi-jinks and shenanigans ensue.

We got smut, fluff, jealousy, double dates, Chilton being iconic -- this is the Chilly-Willy fic to end all fics.

Notes

“Petty Torments” takes place in a Season 1 AU. Much is the same from canon, but the timeline is a little off. Hannibal has recently kidnapped Abel Gideon and killed a guard, leaving behind evidence from all of the murders Will was accused of, making it impossible that Will was the killer since he was locked up at the time. Will’s judge is also dead, and so Will is freed after the mistrial.

He and Jack have made plans to try to trap Hannibal, and Will is ready to resume his therapy. However, in this AU, Frederick Chilton has not been framed as the Chesapeake Ripper yet. Miriam Lass has been found and is recovering, but hasn’t seen Chilton. Chilton thinks Hannibal could be the Chesapeake Ripper, but it’s yet to be proven, though he has entertained the possibility based on his interactions with Will in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. He hasn’t seen Will since his release when Will suggested that Chilton come clean about psychic driving Abel Gideon and go to Jack to help catch Hannibal.

Time for Will to resume his therapy...

# Useful Hoops

**Chapter 1: Useful Hoops**

*I'm a good fisherman, Jack.*

*You hook him. I'll land him.*

When Will had dressed for the evening, he'd done it with fishing in mind. He wasn't hunting the Chesapeake Ripper. The way to catch him wasn't to track or stalk. No, it was to *lure* . So, he'd tied himself up in a metaphorical blood knot, decorating his body the way he would a fishing fly, customizing it to catch the exact species he was hoping to hook.

That fish, the sea's apex predator, was Hannibal Lecter. Like a shark, he was born to be a perfect killing machine – no need for evolution. But Will could evolve. He was going to have to if he was going to survive Jack's plan and not be swallowed along with the hook.

New clothes. New haircut and product. New cologne. He took one more glance at himself in the mirror before driving up to Baltimore. Just as important was how he presented himself – how he could attract Hannibal's interest, inspire his trust, make him think that Will was on the way to not only accepting murder, but longing to study at the feet of the master.

He had to separate himself from his antipathy for the man that had falsely imprisoned him. Tried to ruin his life. Killed Beverly and Abigail. On the drive, he activated the ambient pulse in his head, trying to see himself through Hannibal's point of view. What would tempt him the most? What would cloud his mind and encourage him to make a mistake?

He thought of Frederick Chilton's words. "Why did Hannibal not just kill you?"

Will had said, "Because he wants to be my *friend* ."

Now, it was time to convince Hannibal that Will wanted the same thing.

Hannibal was in his office, waiting, it seemed, for Will. Had kept his standing appointment open. And Will was right on time, 7:00 on the dot. Hannibal valued punctuality, of course. Will promised he hadn't come to stick a gun in Hannibal's face this time, and was invited inside.

"Why have you come, then?" Hannibal stood with his hands in his pockets, watching Will carefully as he looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time.

Will crafted his response deftly, the slight turn of his body, a calculated glance up into Hannibal's eyes, an elegant motion of his head. "I'd like to resume my therapy." He said it matter-of-factly, but with a touch of eagerness. Without waiting for a response, Will took his same seat and rested his arms on the chair. Hannibal's face let a tiny expression escape – one

of suspicion clouding over hope – before claiming his own seat and crossing his legs, lacing his fingers together to rest on his thigh. He looked at Will as if trying to read him. Will remained immobile, but let the flicker of a smile across his features.

“Where shall we begin?” Hannibal asked.

As far as a therapy session went, it was unorthodox, to say the least. What they discussed was benign enough; how Will was adjusting to the outside, what freedom felt like, how the dogs had fared under Alana’s care.

The mention of Alana made Will bristle; a strange reflex he couldn’t entirely explain. He thought back to his conversation with her on his porch after he’d been released.

*Is Hannibal safe?*

*From me, or FOR YOU?*

The furious silence that’d followed said plenty. Still, he’d broken it.

*I suggest you stay as far away from Hannibal Lecter as you can.*

Hannibal was looking at him now with those dark eyes. They glittered like pieces of broken glass. Will knew the look; Hannibal was curious. “Tell me, Will – what in particular bothers you about my relationship with Alana Bloom?”

“Nothing,” he lied, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back in the chair.

“You told her to stay away from me.” Oh great, she’d described their porch conversation to him already.

“For her own safety,” Will said. “You’re like a black hole in the middle of space. Anything that drifts too close to the event horizon is sucked into chaos.”

“You’re here. Do you want chaos?”
Will shrugged. “*Want* isn’t the word I’d use. I’ve already, ah… crossed the threshold. I’m in your gravitational pull. Part of my therapy, I think, is… accepting that. Finding peace in it.”

“Insightful.” Hannibal leaned his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands in front of him. Will noticed, a bit too keenly for his comfort, the way his hair fell over his forehead. “Motives can be complex. Was Alana’s safety all you had in mind?”

Will scoffed. “You want me to say that I’m, what, jealous? All right, yeah, sure.”

“Of me, or of her?”

Will scoffed again, as if the thought didn’t exist beneath the layers of his mind. He’d actually considered the question himself, but declined to answer it. Didn’t want to go there. “Look, you go right ahead, Dr. Lecter. I kissed her a couple of times. She wasn’t interested.”

“Because you were unstable.”

“Because I was unstable,” Will repeated. “And I don’t see that, uhm… clearing up anytime soon. So please, enjoy your little, ah… dalliance. Your character reference. Your alibi. I know from experience how helpful it is to have Alana Bloom in your corner. If she thinks you’re innocent, well – she’ll do anything to defend you.”

“That answers my question.” There was a hungry gleam to Hannibal’s eyes now, and the shadow of a smile passing over his face. It made Will’s blood boil.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Hannibal leaned back and laced his hands over his curved knee. “You admitted you were jealous of some aspect of my relationship with Alana Bloom. You then went on to say – emphatically, in fact – that you are *not* jealous of me having a relationship with the woman you once expressed a romantic interest in. Therefore–”

*Oh shit,* Will’s mind whispered.

“You’re jealous of Alana.”

Will shot to his feet, a nearly unconscious action. He couldn’t look at Hannibal right now. His mind was a whirl of unspoken words – *don’t be ridiculous, that’s insane, are you saying I want to be with you, are you saying that you think I want to sleep with you* – none of which he dared to release. Instead he wandered as casually as he could over to the stag statue and reached out to touch the tines of its antlers.

Hannibal waited patiently for a time, but Will heard him get up after a while, felt his presence like a heat source moving closer. Will abandoned his position and went over to the ladder, resting a hand on one of the rungs. He had to say something. This was going off the rails.

At last, his thoughts became coherent. “If that’s the case,” he said coolly, leaning back against the ladder, letting his hips angle in a way that had to be perceived as inviting, “at least part of why you’re having an affair with Alana has to do with making me jealous. To hurt me, because I tried to kill you.”

Hannibal cocked his head, pausing where he stood. Then he closed the distance between them, coming to loom in front of Will where he was stretched out on the ladder. Will’s breath came faster, and perspiration beaded at his hairline. “Yes,” Hannibal admitted.

There it was. The truth, simultaneously exciting and terrifying. In so many words, they’d just declared it. They were both attracted to one another beyond the promise of deep psychological and spiritual connection, of understanding, of the Becoming. Beyond companionship and friendship was relationship.

They desired one another *sexually* .

And as shocking as that knowledge was for Will, left him reeling and… if he was being honest with himself, extremely turned on, he also saw it for what it was in the grand scheme of things. Another part of the lure. Hannibal’s desire for him was *leverage* . Because if Will could be jealous of Alana, Hannibal could be jealous of… someone else.

That idea was not only personally satisfying, but the distraction might cause Hannibal to make a mistake, leave some evidence behind, something that could at last incriminate him as the Chesapeake Ripper.

All this flew through Will's consciousness like a flock of black birds over an empty field.

This was a *moment* .

Hannibal could feel it, too. Will knew because his therapist reached out and put a hand on the ladder frame.

Leaning in.

*For a kiss…!?*

No. Nah. There was–

Oh fuck – yes, yes, this was actually happening.

And part of Will, he was now forced to admit, *wanted* to kiss Hannibal Fucking Lecter, the Chesapeake Ripper, the craven monster, the cannibal.

At the last possible second, Will bailed.

He slid to the side just enough to get off the ladder and step away, turning his back, pretending to examine some sketches Hannibal had left on a nearby table. He could feel Hannibal's eyes burning into his back, but he forced himself to stay facing the other direction. Meanwhile, a klaxon sounded in his mind, a blaring alarm of confusion, signaling dangers he couldn't even imagine.

Anger grew in him now, once the waters within him slowly stilled, rising like a persistent mist from a pond in autumn. There was no way he was giving in to this. He and Jack were going to hook and land Hannibal and he was going to make his therapist suffer up until the very second they slapped the cuffs on those elegant wrists.

At last, he turned back to Hannibal, who was still standing in front of the ladder with his hand curled around the edge as if frozen, staring at Will. Looking, dare he think it, *vulnerable* .

Before he'd fully thought out what he was going to say, Will spoke. "Is that the time? I, um… I have to get going."

This seemed to unfreeze Hannibal. He let go of the ladder and looked at his watch. "Need to let the dogs out?"

"No," Will said with a confidence he didn't actually possess. "I have… a date."

Hannibal's brow clouded over and Will was sure that somewhere in that mask of mildness and therapist's concern, he saw a twinge of pain. "I see." Then, "With whom, if I may ask?"

Ah fuck, of course he'd ask that. Will ran through a few ideas like a slot machine rolling over numbers, hoping to get a match. Someone he'd met online. No. Someone he'd met in the hospital? An orderly? No, that was too close to the whole Matthew Brown thing. Jimmy? No, he'd never put Jimmy in harm's way. Peter Bernadone? Locked up still. His trial lawyer's paralegal had been very attractive, but he didn't remember her name. His neighbor Karla? Eew, no.

The name that came out of his mouth was, "Frederick Chilton."

And in that moment, Will knew a complete and total victory. Hannibal Lecter, Mister Poker Face, master and commander of all emotions and reactions, professional manipulator… *broke character*. The look on his face was pure murder, and it sent a visceral chill through Will's body that braided with a kind of anticipatory pleasure and, yes, he admitted it, sexual arousal.

"Dr. Chilton." The words were razored ice.

Will was almost too overcome with Hannibal's reaction to speak. At last, he found his voice. "Y-yeah."

One facial muscle at a time, Hannibal's expression relaxed back into his usual mask. "Interesting. I thought you had nothing but contempt for him. You implied he tried to keep us apart during your stay in his facility."

"He did. He, uh… thought he was doing what was best."

"For him, or for you?"

Will cocked his head with a daring smile. "Heh. I might not, um, consider him as someone at the top of his field. His therapy leaves… something to be desired. But that's okay. Because he's not my therapist. Which is good, because…" He shrugged. "Y'know, that wouldn't be *appropriate* ."

Hannibal said nothing.

Will kept running his mouth. He knew, the way he knew why a killer killed the way they did, that beneath the veneer of calm, Hannibal was absolutely fuming. And it was more delicious to Will than anything he'd ever tasted in his entire life. "Something just kind of… happened when I was at the BSHCI. I dunno, we just sort of… realized we had feelings for each other. And I'm out now. Not his patient. So we can… explore that. Explore… each other."

Oh fuck. If he wasn't careful, Hannibal might just kill him right now.

He fled to the chair and picked up his coat. "See you next week," he said.

"Please give Frederick my best." Hannibal offered this through a benevolent smile, but Will could sense the poisonous undercurrent of the words.

"I certainly will."

He left, shutting the door behind himself, and let his face break into a wide smile. Will laughed under his breath as he went outside and got into the Volvo.

He paused, the smile drooping. Hannibal was going to realize within a matter of a day or two that Will had been lying, just to get a rise out of him. And shit, didn't that look pathetic and desperate? That was pure junior high bullshit. He was momentarily demoralized. What did this mean for his plan with Jack? How smug and insufferable would Hannibal be when he found out Will lied just to make him jealous?

Will put the car in gear and pulled into traffic. There was only one thing to do.

Make sure he wasn't lying.

# A Certain Degree of Attention

Chapter Summary

In which we have a first date.

**Chapter 2: A Certain Degree of Attention**

On the way to Chilton's house, Will's mind looped and whirled as he grasped at any straw that would make this stupid plan work. What did he even know about Frederick Chilton? How could he convince him to at least go out to dinner once, ensuring that Will hadn't made himself a complete liar? Distracted, he jumped out of his skin when he heard several car horns honking, thinking the light must have turned green. It hadn't; there was some kind of traffic commotion a few blocks back – somebody on a motorcycle splitting lanes haphazardly.

Now a honk behind him. The light *was* green. Will pressed the gas harder than he should have, then had to brake to avoid rear-ending the person in front of him.

This little gamble might be the dumbest thing he'd ever done. Driving over to Chilton's house to try and ask him out. What the fuck had he been thinking, dropping that name when Hannibal had asked?

Too late now.

All right. Frederick Chilton. General Administrator of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Collector of psychopaths, popular keynote speaker for criminal psychiatry conventions, proponent of unorthodox therapies. His interest in psychic driving ensured his reluctance to come forward and name Hannibal as the Chesapeake Ripper, though Will was convinced that Dr. Chilton believed him. Well, that was something they had in common.

Hmm. Taking him to dinner could be tricky. Will had almost forgotten that Abel Gideon had cut Frederick open and rearranged his guts, resulting in dietary restrictions.

Will thought back to how gleefully Fredrick had behaved when Will had told him he wanted nothing more to do with Hannibal, and that Chilton would be his sole caretaker. He'd been desperate to get into Will's head. Will had taken a few of his basic tests, given him a taste, but otherwise rebuffed his clumsy attempts to analyze him. Hmm. Could be a leverage point.

Then again, he didn't even know if Frederick dated other men. He seemed like he might, but that could just be Will buying into a stereotype.

There was nothing to do but try. If he could stand being the third wheel to Frederick and his own ego.

He pulled the Volvo up to the impressive, lovingly-restored brick colonial and left it in the driveway. Getting out and shutting the door, he paused, the cold wind ruffling his freshly-cut hair. He needed an opening line. “Fuck,” he muttered, pocketing his keys and pulling on his coat. The neighborhood was nice; big yards, historic homes, soaring old oak trees and carefully maintained yards. It was quiet, not even a dog barking, every streetlight glowing just so. Somewhere, maybe a block over, he heard a motorcycle engine, but it was gone within a few moments.

Still fumbling with what to say, he walked up the faux cobblestone path to the front door and rang the bell.

After a few moments, the lacy curtain on one of the windows moved. The porch light snapped on, and the heavy inner door opened a few inches. Chilton peered out at him, the look on his face one of cautious curiosity. “...Will?”

Will opened the outer door and held it with the side of his leg, hands in his jacket pockets. “Yeah.”

Chilton glanced around the neighborhood. “What a… surprise.”

“... yeah, um…” Will gave Chilton a once-over, at least, what he could see. He appeared to be wearing a blue and white striped pajama set. Somewhere in the house, a TV played a sitcom, the laugh track unmistakable. It was only 8:00. “Get dressed. Let’s go get a drink or something.”

Chilton stared at him so long that Will thought maybe he hadn’t heard. “This is a… social call…?”

Will pressed his lips together, then sighed helplessly. “Yeah.”

“You’ll have to forgive me, Will. This is… unexpected.”

“Look.” Wil took a steadying breath. In the quiet interim, the motorcycle passed by again. “I’m free because of a mistrial and dropped charges. That’s, ah, not the same as being acquitted.”

The door cracked open a little more. “I suppose it isn’t,” Chilton said.

“I know there’s evidence proving I couldn’t have done what they said I did.” Will looked away, then back at Chilton again, trying to appear wayward and forlorn. Method acting. “But a lot of people don’t care about that. Like… Price and Zeller? They thought I did it. And now they-they don’t — they know it *couldn’t* have been me, but… it isn’t the same between us. I’m always gonna be the guy who *didn’t* kill all those people.” He sighed again. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have come.”

He rotated his shoulders as if to turn to leave.

Chilton took the bait. “Will.” They both paused. “Ten minutes. Would you like to wait inside?”

Will found himself smiling. “Sure. Thanks.”

Chilton’s house was white. Like, a lot of it. There were some antiques mixed with more modern decor that was meant, Will thought, to provide interesting contrast, but really just invoked the concept of an expensive flea market, so different from the effortless way Hannibal curated his home and office. Money, apparently, couldn’t buy taste.

In fact, there was a sort of echo in the decor and, come to think of it, in the way Chilton dressed, his professional interests, his unorthodox therapies… it was suddenly clear to Will that Frederick wanted to be like Hannibal Lecter— the Hannibal Lecter construct anyway. He was like Hannibal Light. Diet Hannibal. Hannibal Zero. Same great taste, half the calories or whatever.

Will kept his observations to himself, of course, and Chilton appeared again, having changed into slacks, an open-necked shirt, and a blazer. Wordlessly, they went out and got into Will’s car, Chilton visibly wincing when he saw all the dog hair in the back seat.

Will put the car in reverse, then shifted back into park. “I don’t know where to take you,” he admitted. “I can’t remember the last time I was at a bar.”

Chilton sighed a little put-upon sigh. “I suppose the Bayview Bistro will do. It’s the only place you’ll be able to get a table this late.”

The place Frederick wanted to go overlooked the water, featured a jazz pianist, and had votive candles on every table. Will felt underdressed, and increasingly like this was a bad idea. Still, within moments, he was in a window booth across from Dr. Frederick Chilton, a beer and a glass of wine between them, respectively. It was sort of begrudgingly romantic, what with the harbor right outside, the lights from the boats coming and going and the moon shimmering on the water.

“Thanks for coming out,” Will said, and realized he sort of meant it. Mostly because it was going to upset Hannibal, but also, it was actually kinda nice to go do something that felt normal, even if it was with his pompous-ass former therapist.

“There’s something to be said for shared experiences,” Chilton acknowledged, taking a sip of wine. “We’ve both had our brushes with some of life’s more… interesting characters.”

“Abel Gideon, for one,” Will said.

Chilton grimaced, a hand unconsciously passing over his stomach. “I suppose you were a bit… heroic during that whole debacle, weren’t you, Will?”

“Can’t say I remember much of it. The encephalitis was raging pretty hard. I ended up in the hospital,” Will reminded him.

“Yes, but even in such a debilitated state, you saved Alana Bloom and shot the man who mutilated me. Impressive, considering.” He smiled, tracing his fingers up and down the stem of his glass. “You were the crown jewel of my ward. Now that you’re gone, I’ll need a sizable gem to fill the empty setting.”

“We play our cards right and I’ll get you the fucking Hope Diamond,” Will promised. “All the same… it feels… good to be around someone who knows the truth. About… him. Someone who believes me. At this point, at least.”

Will caught some movement out of the corner of his eye. Somebody was pulling up down by the docks… on a motorcycle. Was that the same guy that’d been causing the traffic problems earlier in the night?

No. Couldn’t be. Similar black leather and helmet with a tinted visor. Typical “I’m cooler than the Harley Davidson crowd” biker type. Probably rode a BMW and was having a very bourgeois mid-life crisis.

Chilton was looking at him now with an expression that seemed to have lost at least some of its pompous self-satisfaction. “I should take this opportunity to apologize for not believing you initially.”

“ *I* wouldn’t have believed me.” Will shrugged.

“And my testimony at trial…”

Will lifted his beer and drained half of it. “Let’s just… not. Okay?”

Chilton half-smiled. “I’m more than willing to let the past go.”

But they did talk about the past. Ancient history, however. Safer territory than more recent events. It began with Chilton asking about his family, which might have seemed like benign conversation, except that Will knew Chilton’s curiosity was rooted in crafting a psychological profile of his former “crown jewel.” Still, he told the truth about his mother leaving and his father moving him from state to state, about being the perpetual new kid who didn’t bother trying to make friends.

Maybe it was the wine, which Will had to imagine had a stronger effect on someone missing part of their colon, but Chilton responded in kind. He’d grown up on Long Island. His mother was Cuban, which Will hadn’t known, and had met his father when they’d had a fender bender. Chilton’s father was from an old money New York family and they hadn’t approved of the marriage. He was the youngest of five, with four older sisters.

“No wonder you’re so full of yourself.” Will said it through a smile even as Chilton gave him a withering look. “Baby of the family. First and only boy. They must have… smothered you with attention. Celebrated every little thing you did. Did they, uhm, buy you a pony when you finished potty training?”

“It was a bicycle,” Chilton corrected him crisply.

Will leaned back in the booth to laugh, putting an unconscious hand on his chest.

“I suppose this is what it feels like to be psychoanalyzed based on one’s childhood,” Chilton grumbled after draining his wine.

“How *does* it make you feel?” Will asked, leaning forward on his elbows with his hands clasped. “Lemme guess. Hostile. Defensive because what I’m saying is true but sounds less than flattering. Hurt, because it’s the truth — you were a spoiled brat and got away with everything.”

“Not everything,” Chilton corrected. But it wasn’t with a huff, or sass of any kind. In fact, he looked a little sad, staring at his wine glass instead of making eye contact. It took Will aback for a second. “My mother’s family was staunchly Catholic, my father’s more interested in the family’s image and legacy. They were both horrified when it came out that I'd been kissing a boy I’d met summering in Martha’s Vineyard.”

“Oh.” Will didn’t know what else to say to that.

“My father told his father and it was an entire debacle.” Chilton waved it off now as if it didn’t matter. “I never had time for dating anyway; I was captain of the debate team, a state finalist for Academic Decathlon, and my class’s valedictorian.”

“Still don’t have time?” Will asked before he could stop himself.

Chilton furrowed his brow. “I’m incredibly busy, of course.” He launched into a list of all of the boards and committees he was a part of, as well as his lecture circuit and the books and articles he was working on. Will couldn’t help but wonder, then, why he was home at 8:00 pm on a Friday night in his pajamas watching sitcoms.

“Sounds like life’s pretty full.”

“Well…” Chilton sighed. “I’m also… hesitant to re-enter the playing field for more than just… a casual attachment. I’m divorced.”

“Really?” Will couldn't say he was terribly surprised.

“My ex-wife was the daughter of one of my father’s friends. They guided us toward one another. I felt,” he paused, choosing his word, “ *compelled* to tie the knot, as it were.”

“Do you have kids?” It was impossible for him to see Chilton as a dad — diapers and soccer games and parent-teacher conferences? No way.

“Oh, God, no,” Chilton exclaimed, making a face like he’d just eaten something sour. “Heaven forbid. No. That was a point of contention, among other things.” He softened, relaxing his shoulders. “I’m not the nurturing type. But I suppose *you* are. How many, erm… canines? I thought I spied several different types of fur in your car.”

Will scoffed, smiling through his irritation, mild as it was. “Seven,” he said.

“Seven? That’s pathological, Will. What are you doing in the FBI? Wouldn't you be happier running some kind of… I don’t know, doggy daycare?”

“I think about that a lot,” Will admitted as the server came by to set down another beer in front of him and switch Chilton out for an ice water. “What makes us happy and what we’re good at are, uhm… not always the same.”

“Jack would never let you go.”

Will nodded. “Lives on the line and all that. Though I’m a bit more unemployed than usual at the moment. I lost my teaching position. Which I actually sort of enjoyed.”

“I enjoyed having all my organs,” Chilton said.

Will stared at him hard, crinkling his brow, trying to decide the best way to respond.

“You may laugh, William — it was a joke.”

Will was relieved to crack a smile that Chilton mirrored.

The night seemed to fly by after that. Maybe it was the beers - of which Will admittedly drank four, though it was over the course of hours - but it wasn’t… terrible. They talked about Chilton’s guilty pleasure television show he’s been watching when Will had arrived, how Will had stayed up late as a kid watching old horror and science fiction movies on public access TV, how each of their families had alienated them, how Catholic religious trauma was the gift that just kept on giving. He found out that Chilton’s ex was Jewish and he’d actually officially converted, an experience he’d thought would be agonizing but had forced him to examine his life a bit. Will surprised himself by talking more about his mom.

The bistro closed at eleven and they reluctantly went back to the car. On the way home, Will noticed the motorcyclist again. He thought about saying something to Frederick, but it was completely possible he was being paranoid, and he didn’t want to come off as such. When they returned to Chilton’s house, Will put the car in park.

“Well. That was unexpected but… I found our social interactions surprisingly positive, considering.”

“Stop it with the compliments, you’ll make me blush,” Will deadpanned. They chucked. “Kidding. Uhm, likewise.”

As Chilton moved his hand to open the car door, Will caught sight of the black-clad motorcyclist yet again, pulling up on a side street and pretending to look at his phone.

It had to be Hannibal, or someone Hannibal had hired to follow him tonight. Suddenly it all made sense. And goddamn it was satisfying to know how he’d reduced Hannibal to something as base and pathetic as spying on him, and not even spying very well.

“I’ll walk you up,” Will said, hastily getting out and sort of… escorting Chilton to his door. “You ever know who’s out there.”

“You and I know that better than most. Personally, I find guns barbaric, but I never leave the house without a weapon. Can’t be too careful.” Chilton pulled out his keys as they stepped up onto the stoop.

“You’re carrying?”

“Like I said.” Chilton opened his coat and showed Will the small holster strapped to his belt. “Though I’m not sure what good it’d do. I’m less than expert when it comes to marksmanship.”

“Beverly Katz taught me how to shoot.” Will felt, then, by saying her name, the blighted sting of her absence, sharp along his body like barbed wire. Sure, he’d asked her to investigate Hannibal, but he’d told her to go to Jack with what she knew, not go snooping around Hannibal’s house, which is likely what she’d been doing when she’d been killed. But Hannibal had done the act. Squeezed the life out of her, cut her into strips and encased her in glass.

He was watching right now. And, despite the promise of connection and the deepest understanding of himself that Hannibal offered, Will wanted to give him back some of that pain, even if it was just a fraction of the dark gulf that lived in his own heart. Doing bad things to bad people felt good, even if he was just as damaged at his core.

“You should come by the range at Quantico,” Will suggested. “I can, uhm… give you a few pointers.”

“Much appreciated.” Chilton jingled his keys, then looked at Will again. “It was a pleasant evening. Thank you for your invitation, as unorthodox as it was.”

“I wanna see you again.” Will gave him the best charming but nervous expression he could muster, glancing down and then lifting his eyes just so, letting a curl fall over his forehead.

“You have my number, if I recall. Feel free to use it.”

Will caught movement out of the corner of his eye as the mystery biker put his phone back in the zipper pocket of his black jacket.

Well, if Hannibal, or some hired lackey was spying on them, Will felt he ought to provide something worth seeing.

So he stepped forward, grabbed a handful of Chilton’s coat, and kissed him. It was chaste and closed-mouth, but lasted what felt like a long time. Will felt a blaze of liquid heat sear through his veins, pooling between his legs, igniting an immediate response. Objectively, yeah, Frederick was good-looking, even if he was insufferable most of the time. His visceral experience of that kiss, however, had a lot more to do, Will realized, with the idea of Hannibal or a proxy of his watching the whole thing go down.

Will broke it off and stepped back, letting go of Chilton’s coat. “Was that – uh, was that okay? I should have asked.”

“N-no, I mean, yes – the gesture was… welcome.” Chilton let a besotted smile cross his features for a lingering moment before he arranged his face. “You cannot, however, blame me for being… dumbfounded.”

“I’m in a similar state of mind,” Will lied, trying on a bashful little expression, shoving his hands in his pockets as a form of time-out. “Don’t regret it, though,” he added.

“It’s not the first time a patient has developed romantic notions about me. It happens often.” Oh, right, there was the Chilton he knew so well. The arrogant prick, puffing up now that the initial shock had worn off, as if it was par for the course that Will had kissed him.

“Yeah? Well, I’m not your patient anymore. So am I gonna see you again, or what?” Will only had so much honey in him, and he was on the cusp of switching to vinegar.

“Yes,” Chilton said, and Will had to smirk. There was no disguising that eagerness. Just as he’d hoped – as badly as Frederick Chilton had wanted to get into his head, the desire to get into his pants might be just as compelling.

“All right. I’ll call you.” With that, Will turned and got back into the car.

“Will?”

He paused and turned back.

“I like your haircut.”

He brightened. The compliment felt genuine, surprisingly. Uncoaxed. Offered freely for no immediate gain.

“Thanks. G’night.”

“Goodnight.” Chilton disappeared into his house.

Before he fired up the Volvo, Will heard the distinctive screech of motorcycle tires burning rubber over asphalt. It sounded both wretched and furious.

“This is fucking *fantastic* ,” he muttered through a devious smile as he shifted the car into reverse.

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The next morning, Will lay in bed, smirking as he remembered the events of the previous night. He unlocked his phone and found Chilton’s number in his contacts.

He considered for a moment, and instead selected HANNIBAL LECTER.

“Eat this, you fucking monster,” he muttered, typing.

*I had a great time last night.*

He debated; did he add some kind of emoji or something? How did people flirt over text? In the end, he decided against it. No reason to overtip his hand.

He did, however, add: *See you soon.*

SEND.

Immediately, the text was marked READ.

Will couldn't stop himself from – yes, he had to admit it, – giggling as he sent the next one.

*Sorry, wrong person.*

Hannibal read that one as well.

Three little dots appeared as he typed a response.

Then disappeared.

Then appeared again.

Then disappeared again.

Then appeared again.

Then disappeared again

Then appeared and stayed there, but no message ever came through.

Will laughed so hard and so loud that Winston broke protocol and leapt up on the bed to check and make sure he was okay. Will wiped tears from his eyes and hugged his dog. "Sorry, boy, I didn't mean to scare you." Peals of laughter were not a common occurrence in the Graham household.

Will got up and let the dogs out, fed them, made some coffee, then let himself check his phone again. The three little dots of Hannibal's response were gone. He was left on READ.

As he checked the thread, however, another message dinged. It was Frederick Chilton.

*I'm coming out to Quantico tomorrow for a guest lecture. Would you like to have lunch?*

*Yes,* Will responded. *I had a good time last night.*

*See you then,* came the reply.

# We Live in the Best of All Possible Worlds

Chapter Summary

Will and Frederick are becoming more and more... intimate.

Hannibal's gonna lose his fucking mind.

**Chapter 3: We Live in the Best of All Possible Worlds**

Things were going spectacularly well on the “torturing Hannibal Lecter” front. Will had had a couple of more dates with Frederick – lunch, drinks again, and dinner at a vegan restaurant, which Will found surprisingly palatable. So far, they’d kissed a few more times, mostly goodbye as one was dropping the other off after the date. Each time, it seemed like the intensity was ratcheting up.

Frederick had also taken Will up on his offer to learn how to fire his pistol more accurately.

It couldn’t have happened more perfectly if Will had deliberately planned it. He could have only hoped that Hannibal would smell gunpowder on him and ask about firing a gun, resulting in the big reveal that he’d been helping Chilton practice. But what actually happened was way fucking better.

“You need to widen your stance,” Will had advised after Frederick had squeezed off a few rounds, only clipping the silhouette of a bad guy affixed to the target. “And bend your knees a little. You’re anticipating the recoil too much. Gun’s not that big.”

“Maybe not for you,” Frederick said as Will came up behind him. He put his hands on Chilton’s hips and stuck a leg between his, guiding his feet further open. There was absolutely no mistaking the little change in Frederick’s breathing when he did so. Will smirked and pressed himself against Frederick’s backside under the pretense of guiding his shoulders to the correct position.

And that was when Hannibal and Jack walked in looking for Will. Will noticed the movement down the row of the practice range and glanced over, clocking the two figures coming closer. He pretended not to notice and put his face right next to the back of Frederick’s neck. “Fire,” he suggested.

Chilton squeezed off a few more rounds. This time, he was actually able to hit the target, a couple of times in the kill zone, even.

“Nice work,” Will complimented, releasing him only after a long, significant moment had passed. “Oh, hey, Jack. Dr. Lecter.” They’d removed their ear protection. Jack launched into some explanation about a man being made into a beehive, but Will wasn’t listening. He was

looking at Hannibal, who was deliberately *not* looking at him or Chilton. There was a muscle pulsing in his jaw and his eyes were dilated.

Will had agreed to go see the body. Before leaving, he said to Frederick, "Keep practicing. I'll call you tonight."

"I look forward to it." Chilton popped the clip out of his gun and began reloading, but not before he seemingly couldn't help but give Hannibal a smug smile. It was like the "exclusive care" thing all over again, Will was sure, except a million times worse. And Frederick couldn't resist rubbing it in, even if it meant needling someone he had reason to believe was a cannibalistic serial killer.

Well, if Hannibal thought a little target practice and a promise to call was bad, he was really going to suffer before all of this was over. However it ended. Somehow, in a couple of weeks of playing this game, his bait-and-lure had become much more about torturing Hannibal with his relationship than proving he was the Chesapeake Ripper. Provoking Hannibal like this had an instant reward. Will had come to realize he found it incredibly arousing, thinking about Hannibal watching or somehow finding out about all the things he and Frederick did together. It provided him with a sexy, reckless feeling, not really knowing what Hannibal was going to do to him. One option on the table was straight-up murder, and he thought he should probably be a smidge more worried about that, but somehow it didn't matter. The thrill of the two-sided manipulation was far too intoxicating.

It was time to kick things up a notch.

That evening, he showed up on Frederick's doorstep with a pan covered in foil. Frederick answered the door still dressed, but with his tie and coat off, sleeves rolled up, a pencil behind his ear. He must have been working. "Will," he greeted with a smile. "I didn't know you were coming into town." He backed up and let Will in the front door, closing it behind them.

"This is me, uh, surprising you," Will said, folding back some of the foil from the pan. "You said something last week about missing your mom's empanadas. I found a place that makes them entirely plant-based."

"You didn't." Frederick leaned over and examined the little pastries. "How thoughtful. Thank you. Do you have time to stay for a while? Should we…" He pointed to the pan and lifted his eyebrows suggestively.

"Yeah, I'm curious too." They went into the kitchen to sample. Frederick poured them some wine and they tried the vegan empanadas.

"You can hardly tell they're not the real thing," Chilton raved, helping himself to another one as they stood at the counter. That was a little generous – they were definitely not meat, but they were still pretty good considering. "Again, thank you – your nurturing instinct has turned toward me and it is appreciated."

"I know what it's like to miss the food from home. I still have my Louisiana tongue, even from way back then." Will sipped his wine to clear his palate, hoping his mention of tongue

would encourage the situation. “I can’t find anywhere in town with decent Cajun.”

“Hmm.” Frederick set down his wine and moved closer, the food forgotten. They were almost exactly the same height, Will realized, as Frederick slid a hand around his waist. “I misspoke when I said I didn’t have a nurturing *bone* in my body. I do want to take care of you, Will.” He leaned in and put his lips against Will’s. They were cool and tangy from the chilled wine. “In my own way,” he added after they broke apart, tracing his index finger down Will’s chest. “Would you like to come upstairs?”

Will rested his arms around Chilton’s neck, body tingling where they touched. As much as he’d been steering things this way, he felt himself trembling a little. It’d been a *long* time. If he was lousy in the sack, that could derail things pretty quickly. He took a breath and tried to conceal his nerves. The ambient pulse in his mind whirred to life, and he saw himself through Chilton’s eyes, perceiving himself completely through the filter of the other man’s point of view. He leaned into it, trying to find the right angle.

*Will Graham. Handsome if scruffy, would clean up very well. Rough around the edges. Uses sass and sarcasm as a defense mechanism. Brilliant, complex in many ways I need time to understand. Simple in others. Lonely. Vulnerable. Looking to care for and be cared for by someone who has the capacity to understand him. Doesn’t form attachments easily. I can make it easier. May need to be coaxed.*

Will ran the edge of his teeth over his lower lip briefly, letting a small but uneasy chuckle escape, dropping his gaze before raising it once more, looking at Frederick a moment through his eyelashes before making eye contact again.

*He’s adorable when he’s nervous like this. So prickly and stand-offish – until he stopped denying how he felt about me. I could melt him.*

Fucking Chilton’s fucking ego! Will snapped out of his empathy trick in a spike of anger that burned suspiciously like shame. He didn’t like being psychoanalyzed! Coaxed, like he was a stray cat Chilton wanted to eat out of his hand…!

Two could play at this game. “I’m, uh… sort of…” He laughed softly, and it was perfectly nervous and self-deprecating. The reward was an increased grip on his waist, both hands now, and the gleam of ardor in Chilton’s hazel eyes.

“Whatever you’re comfortable with. I can help you feel comfortable, Will. You’ll find my hospitality here is vastly more generous than at the hospital.”

*I should fucking hope so,* he wanted to say. Instead he just smiled and quirked his mouth again, not making eye contact. “I want to,” he said, trying to code his response with the correct sort of practically-virginal skittishness that warred with desire. “I want… *you* . I just haven’t been close with anyone in awhile.” As much as this was a piece of the manipulation puzzle, it was easy to pull off because, well, it was the truth.

“Just relax,” Chilton advised. He pulled back to hand Will his drink, which he finished quickly. Frederick took him by the hand and led him up the gleaming hardwood staircase to the second floor, opening a heavy door that revealed an ostentatious bedroom full of replica

baroque furniture. The king sized four-poster bed had maroon velvet hangings with gold tassels that matched the bedspread and accents in the curtains. Will had to stifle a laugh. It was the simulacrum of taste. It looked like a bad movie set.

Chilton left him and went to one of the elaborately-carved cabinets. When he folded the doors back, it revealed a little entertainment center with a TV and an iPod dock. He put on some soft, sultry jazz that made his intentions clearer than the tint of pink in his cheeks and the gleam in his eyes. Will wondered if he was going to press a button and all the lights were gonna turn red, the bed flipping over to reveal a heart-shaped rotating mattress with tiger-striped sheets or some shit.

Frederick crossed the room to sit on the bed, toeing off his shoes. He settled on the side of the mattress and patted the space next to him. Will sank onto the ridiculous bedspread and accepted and returned the forthcoming kisses.

“In the interest of communication, I have myself tested every six months,” Frederick told him. “My most recent was approximately eight weeks ago. Based on your responses I’m assuming – and forgive me if it’s incorrectly – that you haven’t been sexually active for quite some time?”

Will wanted to roll his eyes, but that was a reflex – Chilton wasn’t wrong, he was just a know-it-all prick about it. “Yeah. I’m good,” he confirmed, annoyed at the interruption, diving back into the kiss. Then, “Every six months? I thought you hadn’t been in a relationship since you got divorced.”

“I haven’t. That doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy having a full dance card, as it were.”

“Oh, right, of course.”

After a few minutes, things got, as the kids in his various high schools had said back in the day, “hot-and-heavy.” In a little spurt of contrariness, Will pushed Chilton down on the bed and got on top of him. *Coaxed, my ass,* he thought, but instead of being surprised or annoyed, Chilton was 100% into it, kneading his fingers into Will’s backside. When Will started pawing at the buttons on his shirt, Frederick sat up and chased his hands away to do it himself. “Your enthusiasm is more than welcome, but I just had this shirt tailored.”

Will couldn’t stop the incredulous laugh-bark that escaped him as a response. “You’re unbelievable.”

“If you’d like me to tear off that Eddie Bauer atrocity, I’d be happy to.”

“You gotta be fucking kidding me,” Will muttered under his breath as Frederick finished carefully removing his shirt and setting it on the bedside table. Will eyed the long scar on his abdomen where Abel Gideon had cut Chilton open, then pretended he hadn’t been looking. He wasn’t sure if Frederick had caught it or not. For some reason it made him sad, even though it was the consequence of Chilton’s own actions, the result of his psychic driving of Abel and Abel’s identity-crisis-fueled revenge. Frederick had made mistakes. Played around with what he shouldn't have fooled with. Maybe the gutting was *quid pro quo*. It still made Will's heart hurt.

“A momentary setback in the mood to preserve an Armani shirt? I think you’ll survive the inconvenience. In fact, I guarantee it.” Chilton unbuttoned Will’s shirt enough to slide it over his head and tossed it off the bed with no fanfare, then slipped off Will’s shoes and socks before draping his body over Will’s in a more dominant position for further kissing. It was Will’s turn to grab a couple handfuls of ass, which felt firm and exercised.

“I’m on a low-protein diet,” Frederick said between kissing Will’s sternum and flicking his tongue over his nipple, “but, luckily for you, I have no restrictions regarding eating you out, if that’s something you’d like.”

“Uhm…” Will stuttered. Frankly, he was shocked at such a selfless offer. He figured Chilton would want his dick sucked and give Will a half-hearted hand job or some shit. “Can’t say no to that,” he said, because he really couldn’t.

Again, he was astonished into speechlessness as Frederick went to work, stripping him naked and busily eating his ass, pumping his cock at intermittent intervals, tonguing his balls and everything else front to back. It was good – practiced and confident, attentive to Will’s responses, which were becoming more and more strained and desperate as he snagged fistfuls of the maroon bedspread, sweat beading on his brow. “You allowed to have cock on that diet of yours?” He panted out his question a few words at a time.

“A little protein is tolerable.” Thus began the oral, which was similarly well executed. Just having attention paid to his physical needs had a remarkable effect on Will. He was so unused to being touched this much, much less having his dick sucked. It was almost painfully overstimulating.

He pulled back mentally for a moment, dipping his toe into dissociation just for a second, imagining himself from a third person perspective, his cock buried to the root in Dr. Frederick Chilton’s mouth.

Hannibal was going to lose his fucking mind.

That thought made him climax without warning, but Chilton received it gracefully enough. He left Will panting on the bed and poured himself a glass of some kind of brown liquor from a crystal decanter on the sideboard, finishing it before returning to the bed. “You seem… relaxed,” he noted, running the back of his hand over Will’s scratchy cheek. He was so fucking pleased with himself Will almost wanted to deny it somehow, but it was far too visually evident that he’d loved every second of it.

Will squirmed out from under Frederick and pushed him down on his back, pulling on his belt. “Better let me take this off,” he warned, unbuckling it and snaking it free of Chilton’s trousers before tossing it over his shoulder and getting to work on the button and zipper. Chilton stopped him, however, once he’d finally gotten down to the dark gray boxer-briefs. “What now, for fuck’s sake?” Will growled as Frederick got out from under him and opened up a bedside drawer, rooting around inside.

“I have a personal mantra regarding romantic encounters,” Chilton told him, handing him a bottle of lube. “Are you allergic to any of these ingredients?”

Will squinted at the tiny writing. “What? No– Frederick, what the f–”

“It’s a house rule that my partner has at least two orgasms before I have one of my own. So if you’d get on your hands and knees, Will.”

Will stared at him in utter disbelief that had shocked him into silence. After a beat, he wordlessly did as he was told, accepting the pillow Frederick gave him to lean on, ass in the air. Chilton squirted some lube in his hands and rubbed them vigorously together to warm it up with friction before slicking Will’s thighs and up into his crevice, and gently anointing his dick, which was still in recovery mode. Next, he retrieved a latex medical glove from the drawer and slid it onto his left hand.

“Have you ever had your prostate stimulated?” Chilton asked him.

Will felt himself blushing and was glad he was facing away. “Uh… can’t say that I have.”

“You’re in for a treat.”

“Oh fuck–” Will winced as Chilton circled his hole with the gloved hand.

“Relax. Trust me, you’ll enjoy yourself. I’ve been told I’m a master when it comes to this particular trick.”

Will hadn’t been fingered since college, and it hadn’t been the best experience. Still, he let Chilton in. It definitely didn’t hurt, but wherever he was rubbing wasn’t, Will thought, probably what he was looking for, even though he himself didn’t know what it felt like. But he did relax, and the act itself did feel good, along with the idea of being attended to, with someone literally kissing his ass. Pretty soon he was hard again, dripping.

“Forgive my impatience.” Chilton abandoned the glove and slid his cock between Will’s slicked up thighs, then reached around to grasp him from the front. But, true to his word, Will did come again, and only then did Frederick finish.

"You seemed to enjoy yourself," Chilton said, spooning him from behind. Despite the post-coital relaxation, Will could sense a thread of anticipation still in the air.

It cleared up when Will said, "Yeah, it was really good." And it had been. Two orgasms after such a long dry spell. Human touching. All good things. "Definitely good."

"Mmm, yes, it *was*," Chilton complimented himself with a self-satisfied purr.

*Jesus fucking Christ,* Will's mind moaned.

They didn’t cuddle long, which was fine with Will, because while touch in general felt good, he definitely wasn’t used to it. Chilton got up briefly to wash up, then returned to the bed in a robe, getting under the covers. “Your turn,” he said. Will went, but he didn’t do much in the way of cleaning up, aside from sponging off a few wet spots.

When he came back, Chilton was already asleep. Snoring, even. Will shook his head with a half-affectionate eye-roll, and got dressed. Before he left, he woke Frederick up. “Hey. Sorry

to bail, but I have an appointment."

"Goodnight," Chilton muttered, and rolled over.

Will had almost made it to the door before Chilton called out to him. "Will?"

He turned. "Yeah?"

"Can you put the empanadas in the refrigerator, please?"

Will chucked. "Yeah, no problem."

The snoring began again almost immediately. Will let himself out, put away the food, and got into his car. If he didn't hurry, he would be late.

Maybe it didn't matter. Because if Hannibal hated tardiness, he was REALLY going to hate what else was in store for him during this session.

# The Pessimist Believes This to be True

Chapter Summary

Will shows up for therapy right after having sex with Frederick Chilton.

**Chapter 4: The Pessimist Believes This to be True**

It was exactly 7:00 when Will knocked on Hannibal's office door. It opened within moments, revealing Hannibal in his waistcoat with his sleeves rolled up. A glance at his desk showed he'd been working on a pencil drawing while waiting for Will to arrive.

"Please, come in."

"Thanks." Will stepped into the office and took off his jacket just as Hannibal passed to take his usual place in the chair opposite. Perfectly timed. The breeze created by removing the coat, just a little movement of air… Will watched as carefully as he could without being too obvious.

You would have needed to be half-blind to miss the moment when Hannibal scented Chilton on Will's body. He was halfway into his chair but suddenly stood again, glaring down at Will as he took his own seat. His expression was subtle but hinted at something absolutely feral.

"Dr. Lecter?" Will asked with an innocent lilt to his voice.

His name seemed to startle Hannibal out of his reverie. He masked his face again and settled into the chair opposite, crossing his legs and resting his laced hands on his knee. It was hard to see in the soft lighting but Will was pretty sure his knuckles were white where his hands gripped one another.

"How was your week?" His voice was completely featureless, masked as well.

"Busy," Will said. He filled Hannibal in on the latest with the beehive case. The eyeless victim had died the previous morning, and hikers had found yet another hive man arranged overlooking the trail with a bouquet of flowers in his lap. The latest victim had no ID and wore dentures, so they were keeping an eye on missing persons reports. Will described his theory that the killer might be female this time.

Then he went on about how Zoe was getting a cold but he was worried it might be something worse, considering how old she was, and Buster had eaten an entire box of uncooked pasta the other night.

After a while, he shut his mouth. Hannibal appeared to have been listening, but seemed frozen in place, a subtle flush in his cheeks, dark eyes glittering with an inhuman, savage light. The silence was deafening.

"…what?" Will asked, as if he didn't know. This was RICH. Hannibal might as well have been foaming at the mouth.

At last, he spoke. The words seemed normal and uttered in a harmless cadence, but with his ambient pulse, Will could feel the slice and sting of each one like the lashes of a whip. "How is your new relationship progressing?"

"Sorry again about that text. I was trying to use the phone while Ellie was jumping into my lap," he said with a little chuckle.

Hannibal didn't move, didn't speak, didn't breathe. It was, Will realized, with an ice cube slide of fear down the back of his neck, absolutely terrifying.

"It's going really well," Will said, tilting up his chin as a kind of a dare, despite his instincts that told him he was about to be brutally murdered. "We've had lunch, gone out a few times. We talk on the phone a lot. He calls me to say goodnight."

"You enjoy spending time with Dr. Chilton?" The question was probably meant to be banal, almost filler, but it sounded more like an accusation.

"Yeah," Will said, sitting with his legs open in the chair, hoping that the smell would carry. He'd only superficially cleaned up after sex, and he had no doubt that Hannibal's sensitive nose wouldn't just smell Chilton's signature cologne (Dior Sauvage) but the traces of their mingled body fluids. "I don't think anybody really knows him very well. I know how he presents, but he's a lot more complex than most people give him credit for."

"In what way?" Hannibal challenged. Will saw his nostrils flair at the end of the last word in the short sentence. There it was! *Yes, Dr. Lecter – that is what you think it is.*

"His family pressured him to reject his sexuality until he got out of the house," Will said. "And pressured him into a marriage that didn't end well. We have different kinds of trauma. Different flavors, if you will. But, ah, there's no such thing as big-T Trauma and little-t trauma, is there?"

"Would you say his arrogance is based on a deep sense of insecurity?"

"Definitely."

"And you find this *attractive* ?" Hannibal, it seemed, could barely keep the poison from dripping out of his mouth as he said the words.

"I find it relatable," Will fired back. "I can empathize with it."

"You can empathize with anyone. If you can empathize with a murderer, certainly it's no challenge to put yourself in the shoes of someone whose inadequacies are masked in such a predictable manner."

Will cocked his head, keeping his mouth clamped shut until he could deliver a response, not a reaction. “I appreciate how *honest* he is with me,” he said, soft and textured with bitterness.

“And are you being honest in kind?” Hannibal made his hands into a steeple and rested them on his chest, a smug motion.

“Yes,” Will blurted.

“Are you being honest with *me* ? Now, at this moment?”

“Yes.” Fuck, the truth just *sounded* different. He could tell that Hannibal knew that was a lie. Danger. Will crossed his arms. “How about Alana Bloom? Are you honest with her?”

“I’ve always told her the truth in my own way,” Hannibal said.

Will scoffed in response. “So that’s a no. Well, that’s to be expected. If you told her the truth she wouldn’t die on a hill defending you, would she?”

“What truth do you think I’ve withheld from Alana?”

“You know,” Will said, his voice flat and brittle.

“Alana is very devoted to me,” Hannibal said, switching which leg was crossed. “It’s a shield I appreciate. She’s shifted it from protecting you to protecting me. Her loyalty is admirable. Dr. Chilton, in contrast, called you a multiple murderer in front of God and everyone.”

“He apologized,” Will snapped.

“I tried to help you,” Hannibal said, leaning forward and putting his elbows on his knees. Inhaling, he thought better of it and stood, rolling down his sleeves and picking up his jacket from the back of the chair. “I still want to.”

“What you consider help is unorthodox, to put it politely.” Will got to his feet as well, wandering over to Hannibal’s desk in an effort to collect himself. Before leaning against it, he glanced at the half finished drawing. It was another iteration of the Wound Man. But this time, it had Frederick Chilton’s face, twisted into a grotesque moan of agony. Triumph flared in Will’s chest and braided into another unexpected surge of sexual tension.

“As long as I’ve known you, Will, you’ve been a man in search of his best self.” Hannibal fixed his collar and cuffs with businesslike flicks of his fingers and wrists. “How does your new relationship further this goal?”

“I don’t understand the question,” Will lied, crossing his arms again, tilting his ass back against the edge of the heavy wooden desk.

“No one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. By that love, we see potential in our beloved. Through that love, we allow our beloved to see their potential. So tell me, Will – how does Dr. Chilton allow you to see your potential?”

“I never said I loved him.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Will snapped it shut and ground his teeth together. *Shut the fuck up,* he advised himself. “ *Yet* ,” he added. “It’s only been a couple of weeks. What, you want me to go buy a ring or something?”

“Love either pays you a visit, or he doesn’t.” Fucking fuck. Hannibal looked so pleased with himself Will wanted to pick up the scalpel he used to sharpen his drawing pencils and stab him in the fucking face. Carve that little self-satisfied smirk on there permanently. His sudden violent thoughts chilled him marrow-deep. He could see himself doing it. The visualization was clear, crisp at the edges. The blood was *so red* .

Hannibal was still talking. “Perhaps you and Frederick are waiting at the proverbial airport gate, waiting to see if Love disembarks, or if the flight is delayed. Or canceled.”

“I swear to God, I don’t know what you’re talking about half the time.” Will set his jaw and jutted his chin up, a defiant little gesture. Despite this, he couldn’t help but say, “And how about you and Alana? Are the two of you, uh, waiting in ‘arrivals’ or are you gonna propose any day now?”

No response. Hannibal had gone icily silent.

“You two got together when I was on the inside,” Will went on. Fuck Jack’s plan, fuck being safe, fuck the Chesapeake Ripper. He was furious now with Hannibal Lecter, the man standing in front of him. “Let me guess – she was looking for a shoulder to cry on, and you were more than willing. She felt like she was losing me, like I was dead or something, and was looking for the-the *comfort* of intimacy. Made her feel alive, like she wasn’t buried along with me. Any of this sound familiar?” No response. “But then I got out and she thinks she can… I don’t know, make lemonade? The two of you got together under funerary circumstances and now she’s trying to keep it going. Doubling down. Which is fine by you, isn’t it? You might not have caved that night, whenever she came on to you, if I hadn’t…” He checked himself at last. “If Matthew Brown hadn’t tried to kill you. You wanted me to feel how you felt.”

“You think,” Hannibal said, his voice gentle danger, “that I took advantage of Alana’s grief for you?” Will didn’t realize it until he’d finished speaking, but Hannibal had moved closer, his dark eyes inky pools, shark-dead. “Tell me, Will, did it ever occur to you that she might have taken advantage of *me* ?”

And just like that, they were within touching distance. Will was acutely aware of Hannibal’s looming physical presence, how much larger he seemed than a paltry two or three inches taller. He only had a second to consider it before Hannibal’s hand shot out and closed around his wrist, squeezing hard enough that Will swore he could feel his bones grinding together. The other hand closed around the fabric of Will’s shirt just over his heart, twisting mercilessly.

Will put his free fingers around Hannibal’s grip on his shirt and tried to push his hand away. Hannibal didn’t budge an inch. They stood there like that, motionless, breathing in the vast quiet of the dimly-lit office, Will scenting Hannibal’s signature cologne of musk, smoke, and warm amber, just as Hannibal no doubt could still catch Chilton and sex on Will.

Slowly, a muscle at a time, Hannibal's grip on him loosened, until he was merely holding his wrist, and his hand was resting, palm down, on Will's chest. Whatever was going through Hannibal's mind was unfathomable to Will, even as he tried to activate his ambient pulse, to pull the empathy between them and get a taste of Hannibal's perspective. The tide kept shifting before he could get a foothold.

He had the distinct impression that Hannibal was either going to kiss him, or tear out his throat with his teeth.

After a long moment saturated with the aching tension, Will wiggled his wrist free of Hannibal's grip and stepped to the side, out of his reach. He backed up to the chair and picked up his coat, and then turned his back to leave. He felt his muscles coiling, half-expecting to be attacked from behind. It didn't happen. He opened the door and left.

# Fussy Aesthetics

Chapter Summary

> By the end of the day, everyone at the Behavioral Science Unit knows about Will and Chilton.

Will was in the middle of debriefing Jack on the Hannibal-luring plan when they had to bring the conversation to a quick halt. Alana Bloom was knocking at Jack's office door. Will and Jack smoothly pretended they'd been talking about the beehive case as Jack motioned for Alana to enter. Will hadn't really seen her much since their tense conversation on his porch when she'd asked if Hannibal was safe.

*From me, or for you?* Will had snapped in response. That was the day he'd given her a gun and told her to practice. Best case scenario, she kept herself safe with it. Even better, Hannibal smelled gunpowder on her hands and would know she didn't fully trust him, which could drive them apart. Assuming she took Will's advice, which he doubted.

"Dr. Bloom, thanks for coming," Jack greeted as she settled into the chair next to Will's, across from Jack's desk. "Will and I were just discussing our beekeeper. Will's profile points to a middle aged woman with a kind of killer nurse instinct, like Jane Toppan. We were in need of a female perspective."

"What makes you think a woman did this?" Alana asked as she slipped off her coat and herringbone patterned scarf, and crossed her legs.

Will inhaled to speak, and froze.

Alana smelled like Hannibal.

Will doubted his nose was anywhere near as good as Hannibal's was, but there was no mistaking it. It wasn't his body so much as his cologne, that sultry, luxurious smell that was part sex, part pagan bonfire, part ancient library. A scent, he realized, that he coveted like a greedy child hoarding candy from his siblings. Coming from Alana, the smell felt *stolen.*

Ridiculous. Absolutely fucking ridiculous. Just because he and Alana kissed one time didn't mean anything. That whole "bro code" about not dating your friends' exes was tenuous here at best since it was just a kiss and a rejection. And Hannibal wasn't even his friend. The light of friendship would never reach them in a million years. And even if they were friends—

Jack and Alana were both looking at him, waiting for him to speak.

"Train of thought… just detailed, Uhm…" Will bought himself some time by thumbing through the case file.

Then he realized — that was Hannibal's scarf she was wearing. No wonder it smelled like him, having sat directly against the skin of his throat where he no doubt applied the corresponding aftershave that matched the cologne he favored.

An item once wrapped around his neck, snug and warm and intimate.

Will trembled in a breath, eyes glazed over as he pretended to glance through an autopsy report. He'd like to get something around Hannibal's neck. His hands. Squeezing the life out of him. Or maybe just a little sensual pressure while he—

"So, uhm, the killer, she's uh, she's relieving their pain," Will managed at last. "And she sees their remains as being reusable. To help the bees and, um… to connect them with nature again."

"Dust to dust," Jack muttered, picking up a glossy crime scene photo.

"Women do take on more nurturing roles. That of a caregiver, like a nurse," Alana said. "But she must want some kind of control over these men."

"She decides when their suffering is enough," Will added. "She chooses for them when their quality of life isn't… worth the effort expended. If the world is her hive, she's culling off the dying drones. For the good of the colony."

"But with loving care," Alana noted. "Not just disposing of them."

"We think the bee stings are perimortem," Jack said, pointing to a picture of a dead man's chest, riddled with swollen insect stings.

"Strange. They don't look random."

Everyone turned to see Hannibal standing in the doorway. Will's empathy pulse roared to life and within seconds he read every little expression, body language cue, and the angle at which Hannibal had been leaning on the doorframe.

He had come here, specifically and deliberately, to see Will's reaction to Alana's borrowed scarf.

"Dr. Lecter," Jack greeted. Will was impressed with the casual way he spoke, considering they'd so recently been discussing plans for Hannibal's downfall. In contrast, Will wasn't feeling casual, or calm, or calculating, or sane. Hannibal had already rubbed Alana in his face. He'd done it in the first place to make a point about the Matthew Brown thing. No, he didn't get to be smug or self-satisfied or retaliate. He was supposed to suffer, to think about Will and Frederick and know Will *didn't need him.*

Wait, was that the plan? What about the lure? What about the Chesapeake Ripper? Will was supposed to be making Hannibal think he wanted to become his acolyte, not drive him away.

These rational thoughts and unanswered questions sank into the mire of his jealousy and anger.

*That scarf should be around MY neck.*

The churning emotion in his heart became those words in his mind and he went cold. *No. That's not what I meant. That can't be what I meant.*

"…don't you think, Will?" Alana was looking at him expectantly. They all were. Hannibal had a particularly catlike smirk on his proud face.

"It's possible," he mumbled, not sure exactly what he was agreeing to.

"All right, we'll check for female acupuncturists in the area," Jack said. "That's a good lead. Nice work, team."

"Just in time for lunch." Hannibal offered his hand to Alana to help her stand. "Shall we?"

Oh, so that was the flimsy pretext for being here, wonderful. Well, that was Hannibal Fucking Lecter for you. He always thought of everything.

Just when Will was furiously trying to think of something to say or do to salvage the situation, to prevent Hannibal's victory from being complete, a woman appeared at Jack's office door. Well, it became clear it was a woman only after she spoke; before, she presented as a pair of legs, the rest of her concealed by a massive floral arrangement and matching vase. "I'm looking for Will Graham?" Her voice was cheerful but bordering on panic as her apparently small frame wavered beneath the vase's unwieldy weight.

Jack reacted first, moving swiftly for a man of his muscled bulk. He relieved the delivery girl of her burden and placed the flowers on his desk.

"Thanks!" She chirped. "Have a lovely day!"

"You as well," Hannibal muttered, his manners unable to be conquered even by the murderous rage and disbelief will could feel building in him like a shift in barometric pressure.

Will was too stunned to move just yet. Jack was looking from face to face, eyes narrowed as if trying to interpret the snap-fast vibe change.

The arrangement was not only impressive in its sheer size, but if someone was going to customize a bouquet for Will Graham of all people, this would be the one. It was a beautiful, flamboyant array to be sure, but made of natural looking plants and blossoms that captured lovely, subdued harvest hues of dark orange, toasted gold, subtle amber, and evergreen. The vase was bronze and the entire creation was accented with fall berries and a spray of topaz pheasant feathers.

"W-who are these from?" Alana furrowed her brow, looking from face to face. "Will, are you… seeing someone…?"

"Uhm…" Will started as Alana stood up to lift the little harvest gold card from the arrangement.

“Wait!” Jack thundered. Alana shrank back. “It might be the beehive killer trying to send Will a message, like Tobias Budge’s murder serenade. Bees, flowers, there might be a connection here. Get Zeller and Price in here to process it. There might be DNA—“

“I *am* ,” Will said loudly, sweat gathering on his brow as he simultaneously gathered his wits. “I’m seeing someone.”

Silence. Hannibal’s face was perfectly blank, to the point of looking inhuman. Alana’s damn mouth was actually hanging open. Jack looked furious, thunderclouds on his brow.

Alana eventually shut her mouth and plucked the card from where it was nestled in the flowers. “‘To Will, thank you for a lovely surprise last week. Enjoy the rest of your day, *cielito.* From Ricky’.” She paused. “Who’s Ricky?”

Just then, Zeller stepped into the office holding a huge cinnamon roll in one hand. “Hey Will? Somebody just dropped off a huge box of baked goods and shit for you in the crime lab — can we, uhhhh…?” he wiggled the cinnamon roll. Like Will was gonna say ‘no’ now that he’d touched it.

“Go ahead,” Will said.

“The delivery guy said it was from Dr. Chilton. I mean, he probably sent them to like, say sorry for how he treated you in the BSHCI, right?”

Nobody said anything.

“…right?” Zeller repeated. Everyone looked at Will, who thought he might die from how hard he was blushing. Loaded silence. Z backed up from the door, taking a large bite of cinnamon roll, and slipped away.

“Frederick Chilton… is… *Ricky?”* Alana was visually flabbergasted.

“Well, he certainly can’t call him Freddy,” Hannibal said, voice perfectly even like a pond on a windless day, one with dark waters and coiled monsters lurking beneath the surface. “I think the reason should be obvious.”

“Will, you’re… these are from… Frederick *Chilton* ? Dr. Frederick Chilton?” Alana’s incredulity was almost panicked.

“Yeah.” Will tried to calm the burning in his cheeks, squaring his shoulders and staring straight at Hannibal. “They are.”

“Hey everybody!” Jimmy Price popped his head into the office. “There are treats in the crime lab! You have to try the cinnamon roll —- oh my God, would you just look at those flowers? They’re absolutely breathtaking! Jack, are those for Bella?”

“No,” Jack said, leaning back in his chair as if trying to physically remove himself from the situation. “Dr. Chilton sent them.”

It was Jimmy’s turn to drop his mouth open. “To *you* ? Why?”

“To Will,” Alana corrected.

Jimmy cocked his head, looking from one mortified face to the next. “I think my question is still relevant.”

“Because he’s my… person. That I’m dating.” All of the words tumbled out of Will’s mouth in a great rush.

“Will! That’s adorable!” Jimmy rushed in to touch the feathers. “This is so gorgeous, you lucky boy!” He paused, then shrugged. “Problematic but lucky.”

“Problematic doesn’t even begin…” Alana shook her head. “He was your therapist. And when you were in the…” she trailed off. Hannibal stepped closer and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. It looked like support in the sense that he was acknowledging she was upset. But Will knew what it really meant, could feel it rolling off of her in waves, fueled by Hannibal’s puppeteering. He was *deploying* Alana with that touch. Giving her a command the way an owner would sic a dog on an enemy. “How could you think that’s healthy, especially now?”

“Are you fucking serious?” Will demanded, glaring at her and Hannibal in turn.

“OUT!” Jack’s sudden roar made everyone freeze, snapping their mouths shut. Jimmy emitted a little whimper and shied away from the floral bouquet. “I’m done with all of this who’s-sleeping-with-who nonsense! Come back when you know who’s turning old men into fucking *beehives* !”

Everyone dutifully filed out of Jack’a office as he looked behind his desk, fixing them all with a baleful glare. “Will!”

Will paused before leaving.

“Take this goddamn thing with you.”

Will returned to the desk and bent over to pick up the enormous arrangement. As he did, Jack whispered, “What the hell are you doing? How is this helping our plan?”

“Trust me,” Will whispered back. “I have him right where I want him. He’s going to make a mistake, Jack. I’m a good fisherman.”

With that, he picked up his flowers and left.

Outside, Will found Alana skulking by the Volvo. He groaned, shooing her out of the way to open the car and buckle the flowers in the front seat like a passenger. “Can you make this quick? I need to let the dogs out. Oh, that reminds me — how’s Applesauce? Since you never talk about her. Does she like Hannibal? Or can she sense evil? He trained my dogs to like him, of course. Maybe the same way he’s training you. With *sausage* .”

“Will,” Alana said with infuriating patience. “I’m not attacking you. I would appreciate a few minutes of your time to talk. That’s all.”

“Weaponized concern, got it.” Will shut the car door and leaned against it, crossing his arms.

“I’m not sure what I’ve done to make you talk to me like this. Will, you’re going completely off the rails and I’m trying to get you to stop for a minute. You just got out of the BSHCI. You tried to kill Hannibal, but you’re back on speaking terms — and in therapy no less. And now you’re… in a relationship with *Frederick Chilton* of all people. Your behavior isn’t just strange, it’s downright *erratic* . Maybe you should get another brain scan. You can’t blame me for being concerned–”

Will scoffed. It was meant to sound mean, and went off successfully. “Let’s be honest – I’m not allowed to blame you for *anything* , am I, Alana? But you-your a-allowed to treat me like… I’m a child. Or crazy. And what’s with everyone saying ‘Frederick Chilton of all people’ all the time?”

Alana sighed. “Because you always seemed like you despised him. I’ve known Frederick a long time and the two of you don’t seem compatible whatsoever. It makes me wonder if this isn’t some kind of game.” She stepped closer. “I’m trying to help you. I’m saying the things nobody else has the courage to say! You’re not making healthy decisions and, despite what’s probably best for both of you, Hannibal is in your life. And that means I am, too. I don’t want to see you hurt and I also don’t want to drown in your wake when this blows up in your face.”

Will couldn’t stop the nasty little chuckle that came out. “That’s rich coming from you. And did it ever occur to you that Frederick might have some… some qualities you don’t know about? That he doesn’t show everyone? That I might actually *like him* ?”

Alana just raised her eyebrow.

“Everyone thinks I’m a grumpy fucking… *asshole* with no social skills,” Will continued his argument. “And yet you want to protect me. You all but said you would date me if I was stable. The prickly way I present myself has… *nothing* to do with my stability.”

Alana’s benevolent smile had curled down into a lipstick scowl.

“So by that logic, you see something in me that not everybody does. Y-you have to admit that people can be… something *more* than what they seem. And I’m telling you that Frederick is one of those people.” He paused, letting it sink in. “So is Hannibal, for that matter, but you won’t see what he *really is* until it’s too late.”

Speak of the Devil. The Bentley had pulled up behind Will’s car. Hannibal got out, with his concerned mediator face on, ready to get between Will and Alana and smooth things over, as if he hadn’t caused all of this to begin with.

Will pretended not to see him. “Wanna know what Ricky’s really like? *Sweet* . But the world sees that as weakness. Can you blame him for walking around with armor on, as irritating as it is?” He stalked around to the other side of the car and yanked the door open. “And he’s *really* good in bed, too, by the way, in case you were wondering.”

He couldn’t help it. Like Lot and Orpheus, he turned and looked.

Hannibal had stopped a few feet away and was staring at them. His eyes were black with rage. They held each other's gaze for a long moment. Will was vaguely aware of Alana looking at them each in turn. Saying something that sounded far away in his ears like he was hearing her underwater. After a drawn-out moment, Will got in the car, ramping it over the curb so he could get out without Hannibal moving the Bentley.

# There’s No Accounting for Taste

Chapter Summary

> After watching Peter Bernadone's social worker climb out of a horse, Will almost shoots him for how he mistreated Peter. Hannibal stops him, just like in the show. This chapter picks up on the drive home after Ingram is apprehended and Peter taken into psychiatric care.

**Chapter 6: There’s No Accounting for Taste**

*With all my knowledge and intrusion... I could never entirely predict you. I can feed the caterpillar and I can whisper through the chrysalis, but... what hatches follows its own nature and is beyond me.*

The warm interior of the Bentley was dark and quiet, save the subdued strains of the Goldberg Variations that whispered through the chrysalis of silence, shaping the two beings within. Will let Hannibal’s words run rampant and unleashed through his brain, whipping wildly from one side to the other like the hounds of the Wild Hunt.

*What am I becoming?*

As much as he’d felt like he’d lorded some kind of power over Hannibal these past few weeks as he tortured him with his new relationship, Will was more aware than ever at this moment that Hannibal was changing him, too. Even as they each moved their chess pieces, trying to anticipate one another’s next play, doing what they could to distract their respective opponents with petty torments, the game continued uninterrupted.

He’d almost shot a man tonight. And part of him was furious with Hannibal for stopping him. Hell, if he’d started shooting he could have just shot Hannibal too. End the whole fucking mess. Back to prison. Real prison, probably, where as a former cop he’d be dead before the end of the month.

It was terrifying, how much he’d wanted to kill Peter Bernadone’s social worker. The desire for righteous justice had been all consuming, a wildfire blazing away anything else, leaving scorched earth in its wake. Now that he was back to his senses, the memory of how the desire to kill, to feel the same zest he’d reveled in when he’d shot Garret Jacob Hobbs, had possessed him was beyond horror. It was so inconceivably ugly and inhuman. He hated himself for it.

He was a monster.

Will glanced over at the driver's seat.

So was Hannibal Lecter.

And that was by design.

"Pull over," he ordered suddenly.

"Are you all right?" Hannibal's pale brows knitted in concern.

"Just pull over."

Hannibal did as directed, easing the Bentley onto the thin gravel shoulder of the deserted two-lane road that snaked through the woods. Will got out, slamming the door behind himself, and plunged into the trees, his feet crunching on the dead leaves and twigs of the undergrowth. He paused after a time, resting his hand on the trunk of a gnarled tree, head bent, focused only on his breathing. The wind rustled the forest, rattling the bare branches. It had begun to snow, thick, feathery flakes drifting gently through the sky, with such slow grace they almost appeared underwater. It was bitterly cold, but Will could still feel the warm, comforting outline of Hannibal's hand where it had cupped the side of his face. It had been a gesture of *cherishing* . Of startling affection. Of possession. It was driving him mad.

Will watched as the stag with the raven's-feather fur walked between a pair of evergreens before melting back into the shadows.

A hand on his back.

Will started, flinching away. It was Hannibal, of course. "Will."

"Why?" Will demanded, his sudden barked word echoing through the lonely woods.

Hannibal waited patiently for him to clarify. When Will did not speak further, just set his jaw and balled his fists, Hannibal asked, "Why what, Will?"

"Why all of it! Why *any* of it?!" This was more of a demanding shout than a question. Will put his hands in his hair a moment, pulling it. He felt like he was losing his mind again, encephalitis or no. "Why frame me for murder just to set me free? Why sleep with Alana just to… *agonize* over seeing me with Frederick? Why say you're helping me when you're pushing me to kill? And then fucking *stopping me* from-from killing? I d-don't understand you! I got *nothing* ! And I'm sick of it!"

Hannibal did not respond, but Will could see the flicker of something across his face like uncertainty. The pulse whirred for life in his mind and only made the situation murkier.

"You don't even know, do you?" Will said it quietly, his breath crystallizing in front of him.

"Will, you've always presented yourself to me as someone who wants to evolve into his full potential. All I want to do is help you realize it."

“Why? Because you’re curious? I think we’re beyond ‘wind me up and watch me go.’” Will’s breaths in the cold air seared his lungs. He was so furious he was practically panting, tears in his eyes. “If all you wanted was to manipulate me, you wouldn’t be so… so fucking enamored with my-my ‘unpredictability’. B-but enamored or not, it drives you fucking insane when there are parts of me you can’t control! So what do you want? An acolyte? A disciple? A patsy?”

Hannibal didn’t answer right away. “I want to be your friend, Will. You know that,” was what he came up with.

“I don’t know what that means!” Will thundered at him, voice echoing through the hollow woods. “Have you ever… taken a second to think how-how fucking *stupid* that word is? It’s meaningless! It could describe almost any kind of relationship. It’s as descriptive as the word ‘nice,’ which is *not at all* !”

“Calm down.” Hannibal’s voice had gone from coaxing and gentle to authoritative. Tinged with fear, if Will’s empathy pulse was attuned properly, which it always was.

“Just tell me.” Will did lower his voice. He hated himself for begging, but couldn’t stop the words as they tumbled loose.

“I want,” Hannibal said, softer now, everything about him muffled and made gentle by the feather-fall of snow, “for you to see your true potential. I want you to know the whole of yourself. I want you to examine all sides of your nature, unbound by the framework of a meaningless morality that cages you.”

“How?” Will wanted to know, stepping closer, hugging his jacket around himself. “How are you gonna get me to-to that *point* ? And why is it so important to you… that I *change* like that?”

“No one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. By that love we see potential in our beloved. Through that love, we allow our beloved to see their potential. Expressing that love, our beloved’s potential comes true.”

Will swallowed thickly, swiping at the wetness on his cheek. “ *Don’t lie to me* ,” he pleaded, just above a whisper.

“Will.” Hannibal further closed the distance between them. They stood so close that their exhaled breath clouded together in the bitter cold. “It’s not just your potential. I want to achieve my own. And I can’t… not without being seen. Not without the awareness of another.”

Will just stared at him, blinking free a tear. The magnetic pull between them was growing stronger by the second, a force of nature, a kind of physics that could not be tethered. Closer. Will could smell Hannibal's nearness, the now-familiar cologne and body made even more sharply enticing by the cold and the muffled sweetness of the snow.

Moving with a languid calm like he was underwater, Hannibal raised his hand again, and rested his large, warm palm against the side of Will’s face. And, God help him, he leaned into

it instead of shying away, even as Hannibal's thumb brushed the tear aside. Closer. Will was drowning, in the monster's nearness and the vast, velvety pools of his dark eyes.

Will felt his resolve dissolve, crumble, erode, sand against the tide. Closer.

Just as their lips were poised to touch, the enmity came crashing back.

Georgia.

Beverly.

Abigail.

Will turned his head at the last possible second, tilting it down. Hannibal's lips merely brushed the edge of his forehead and hair before Will pulled away, trembling with a volatile mix of antipathy and desire.

Hannibal's face was no enigma. There was no need to read a micro expression or use his ambient pulse. He was stricken. Crushed.

Then, the expression smoothed away to chiseled ice.

Will was gripped with mortal terror to turn his back on Hannibal at this exact moment, but he did it, fueled by pain and recklessness and sorrow. He walked past him back towards the road. After a time, he heard the crunch of frozen leaves as Hannibal followed. Will got back into the car and put on his seat belt, dragging his hand over his eyes. Hannibal got in the driver's side, staring straight ahead.

Will's heart went numb as he conjured a new cruelty. "Take me to Frederick's house."

Hannibal didn't move for a moment. Then he fastened his seat belt, and did as he was told.

A frigid silence stretched throughout the entire ride. At last, the Bentley pulled into Frederick's driveway. Will had texted ahead, and the inner front door was open. Will got out of the car without another word and hurried up the steps to the porch just as Frederick opened the door in his shirtsleeves, the collar of his purple and white checkered shirt unbuttoned, the cuffs rolled up. "Will-!"

Will fell into his arms, clasping him tightly. Behind him, he heard the scream of tires as the Bentley sped away, using all 8 of its cylinders to blast up the quiet residential street. Will held on until the sound died away, Frederick closing his arms around, asking questions that Will couldn't understand, such was the roaring in his ears and the thudding of his heart.

At last, the world started to make sense again. "Come inside. Come on, now, come, come on, Will."

Will stepped inside and Chilton shut the door against the cold before ushering him into the living room where he had the gas fireplace going, laptop perched on a nearby table, a stack of patient files next to it. "You're shivering. What's the matter? Your text sounded… strange. Where have you been?"

Will chuckled, because it was either laugh or cry at this moment. “Oh, nowhere, just, uhm… watching a social worker crawl out of a horse.”

Frederick’s face was etched in concern. He lifted his hand and pressed the palm against Will’s forehead, then the back of his fingers. “You’re not making sense. It must be brain inflammation – let me get my coat and I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“It’s not. That’s literally what I saw,” Will insisted. “Ricky, just sit down, okay? Just – be here with me for a while? That’s what I need you to do – j-just be here with me.”

“Of course.” Frederick was clearly brimming with a thousand unanswered questions, but he managed to keep them under wraps for a minute or so as he rubbed Will’s hands in his own, trying to warm them. “Was that… Dr. Lecter who dropped you off?”

Will sighed, feeling a little more like himself. “Yes.” He felt even better when Frederick poured him a glass of bourbon and told him to drink it. “We were just… following up on a lead, and I think – we caught a serial killer. Guy named Ingram. It’s – connected to the girl we found in the horse with the bird in her chest. L-long story, but, uh… yeah. I, uhm…” He smiled through his breaking heart. “It was a lot,” he managed, dragging the heel of his hand over his leaking eye.

“Will,” Chilton said, pulling him into a hug. Will rested his cheek against Frederick’s shoulder and focused solely on breathing.

Chilton petted the back of his head. “Well, that all sounds… dramatic, to say the least. I’m glad you came – I have a surprise for you.” Frederick released him and went into the kitchen. Will cleaned up his face with a tissue while he was gone, and got himself under control, as much as he could.

Frederick returned with a toothbrush still in the package and handed it to Will.

Will stared at it like it was a rock from an alien planet. “Is this… about my breath, or something?”

Frederick chuckled. “No, Will, it’s a toothbrush to keep here.”

“Oh.” Will’s mind was still soaked in adrenaline and he was having trouble making sense of what was happening.

“For staying the night. To encourage you to do so.” He smiled, putting a hand on Will’s knee. “I forget you’ve been out of the dating game for awhile. The toothbrush is highly symbolic in a budding relationship. It means I want you here more often.” He paused. “I picked out a green one. You wear a lot of green.”

Will made a face that was kind of like a smile, but didn’t feel like one. This sweet gesture as a chaser to the horror and pain and uncertainty of the night’s events hit him all wrong and was like trying to swallow something stuck in his throat.

All at once, his flailing emotions caught a handhold, settling on desire. Will knew what this was – he'd felt it before, in the living room of his little house when Alana had caught him tearing out his chimney looking for a phantom raccoon. Wanting Frederick right now wasn't about Frederick. It was a clutch for balance.

But even with this knowledge, he was helpless against it, and guilt was slippery. He couldn't catch hold. It was a fish determined to live, flopping off the side of the boat.

He kissed Frederick then, hard, pushing him back on the wide cushioned couch. Frederick made a little pleased sound of surprise as he collapsed back, still holding the toothbrush until he groped around to put it on the side table behind him while Will pawed open his clothing. This turned into a sharp inhale of staggered breath as Will fondled him through his underwear, a direct message that carried with it perfect clarity.

When Will pulled out his cock and pressed it against his, Frederick moaned through a smile, running his fingers through Will's hair. "All this over a toothbrush – I'll have to get you some dental floss as well–" His word twisted shut as he moaned again at Will's unpracticed but enthusiastic frottage, working both of them together in his hand. "Are you a Listerine man, or–"

"Shut up," Will growled, bending his face into Frederick's neck as he moved his hips, one arm locked against the couch's cushioned arm for support. Even as he tasted Frederick's neck, inhaled his scent, absorbed his sounds with a kiss, his mind was out in the swirling snow, in the deep, dark wood of fairy-tale legend, courting the monster.

*No one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. By that love we see potential in our beloved. Through that love, we allow our beloved to see their potential. Expressing that love, our beloved's potential comes true.*

Translation: *I love you, Will.*

*It's not just your potential. I want to achieve my own. And I can't… not without being seen. Not without the awareness of another.*

Translation: *Please see me.*

Not just that, Will thought, as he continued thrusting against Frederick, kissing his neck so he didn't have to look into his face.

*See me. Know me. Love me for it, not in spite of it.*

As those words floated through his consciousness, he finished, his emission aiding Frederick's situation so he wasn't far behind.

Will released him and sat back on the couch, panting, pants still half-off. Frederick got up and returned with a towel, doing his best to protect the upholstery, of course. Will let him help, then yanked up his clothes and stood, running a hand through his hair, calmed by his release but still deeply agitated by what he'd been thinking about when the orgasm occurred.

Frederick zipped up, then kissed him, a doting press on the corner of his mouth. “Why don’t you stay?” he suggested. “Try out your new toothbrush.”

“I can’t.” Will didn’t even realize he’d refused until the words had escaped his mouth. “I mean, I-I want to. I wish I could. The dogs…”

“Call your neighbor,” Frederick suggested, circling his arms around Will’s waist. “If what you saw tonight bothered you so much that you came to my door in such a state, Will, you really shouldn’t be alone.” His concerned expression cracked just a little when he spoke the last word, the edge of his mouth curling up licentiously.

Will closed his eyes briefly and exhaled through his nose. Did he really expect completely selfless comfort from Frederick Chilton?

Still, it was *nice* to be wanted. It was more than a monster like him deserved, really. Nice to have a place to go where he wasn’t alone with what had happened tonight. Nice to be able to disassociate. Nice distraction. Nice opportunity to play at being human.

Because if he was being completely honest with himself, that’s what this was. A little detour from fate. From becoming.

*No* , his mind insisted. *I’m not like him. I won’t let him change me.*

“Yeah, okay.” He tried on a splintered smile. “Thanks.”

Chilton patted his ass affectionately and turned to go upstairs. “Don’t forget your toothbrush.”

Will picked it up from the table and followed him.

# The Savory Mind

Chapter Summary

It's time for the Baltimore Arts Council's annual holiday charity gala. Hannibal's taking Alana as a flex. What's Will gonna do?

Chapter Notes

This chapter features a glimpse into Hannibal's mind. Back by popular request, my Hannibal 1st person POV :)

**Chapter 7: The Savory Mind**

Will wasn't sure what he expected when he showed up to his next therapy appointment with Dr. Hannibal Lecter. There were numerous scenarios available. It was entirely possible that this was going to be the time that Hannibal killed him, harvesting his organs and eating them later. Or maybe he'd find something more cruel, like drugging Will and cutting off his limbs one by one to eat while Will watched himself being consumed. Maybe make a video of himself cooking and eating Will's brain to send to Jack, a kind of mockery about getting into Will's head at last.

It was also possible that they might finally share a kiss, as off-putting as that was, at least in this moment. Will didn't trust himself, didn't trust his hate to be strong enough to save him over and over again.

Between these two extremes were endless possibilities. What actually occurred, however, was not a scenario Will had expected, not in the slightest.

It was just kind of a normal therapy session.

They didn't acknowledge what had happened the last time they'd seen one another. They briefly discussed Peter Bernadone's case and what was going to happen to Ingram. Then the discussion moved on to other subjects, new murder investigations, how Will was feeling with the semester coming to an end and being out of the teaching field. The upcoming holidays. Hannibal didn't ask about how Will had felt when he'd pulled the trigger and Hannibal had stopped him. He hadn't asked about Frederick, hadn't spoken of Alana.

And this, Will realized, was a thousand – maybe a million – times more disconcerting than discussing any of their more hot-button topics. They didn't flirt, or fawn, or fight, didn't hurl thinly-veiled barbs at one another. It was so achingly normal that it completely destabilized Will's sense of reality.

That was, until the end of the hour.

"I'll need to reschedule for next week," Hannibal said as Will put on his coat, still reeling from the banal therapy session. "I have a conflict during our usual time."

"Oh?" Could be innocent enough. But with Hannibal, he doubted it.

"Yes. I'm taking Alana to the Baltimore Arts Council's holiday fundraising gala at the opera house. Would you like to meet earlier in the week? I could do Thursday at six. Or we could skip a session."

"Yeah, that's fine," Will all but snapped. One sentence. One fucking sentence was all it took to derail the fragile calm and bring it all roaring back – the disdain and the jealousy and unexplained lust, all twisting together in his stomach like a snake pit.

"Then I'll see you in two weeks. Have a pleasant evening, Will."

Will left without another word, unable to even manage a curt goodbye, knowing he was giving Hannibal the satisfaction but unable to do anything about it.

Hannibal was taking Alana out to a very public event. Will remembered that last year Hannibal had attended the gala, but had taken some arts council matron as his "date" even though she was old enough to be his mother – an act of courtesy towards a widow and respect for her societal position. This was very different. Alana was kissable, Will knew, and she was also show-offable. Hannibal would get her some tasteful, alluring dress and she'd have her hair and nails done. Everyone would be talking about Dr. Lecter's date, relishing in the little scandal with regards to how Alana was once his student. Overall, however, it'd be a roaring success, despite the singleton tears shed over the loss of Baltimore's most eligible bachelor.

Alana, again, was a well-chosen accessory. She'd perfectly complement whatever ensemble Hannibal planned to wear, like a pocket square or a tie pin, meant to embellish his look. The evening would go perfectly, to be sure.

*Fuck that* , Will thought as he fired up the Volvo. *Not on my watch.*

***

I always take care when grooming and dressing myself, and tonight is no exception. For this occasion, however, I give myself an extra hour before the appointed time of departure. Every inch of my body is attended to – nails trimmed, skin moisturized and soft, body hair tamed and lamdscaped, the hair on my head in a fresh cut, carefully combed back, product applied just so. Virgin razor, close shave, aftershave, cologne – the latest from Bvlgari, appropriately titled Man in Black. Top notes of tobacco and rum, followed by tuberose, orris, leather. Appropriate, as I have opted for an entirely black ensemble for tonight.

Black is, of course, associated with death. The Romans wore it to funerals as a reminder that death holds dominion over all. One day, we all will succumb to its icy grasp. Some of us sooner than others, and I feel at home in this color tonight, though I rarely wear it in such a monochromatic fashion. I have told myself that I wear black this evening in order to draw everyone's eyes toward Alana. I want her to make a memorable impression.

Upon further reflection, I realize that I am feeling particularly at home in my role as the Chesapeake Ripper tonight – not that I want to kill, but that I want to feel like a harbinger that foretells my own arrival.

As I slide into the back of the hired town car, black to match, and begin to construct my mask, what Dr. Du Maurier calls my "person suit," I am forced to examine why I feel particularly predatory tonight. I do this so that I may conceal it, a necessary obfuscation of course. I have been out of sorts lately, demonstrating a shocking lack of focus and foresight. I have been distracted, allowing myself to experience the same kind of base, uninteresting distress as every other pig that roams the face of the earth.

Dr. Du Maurier told me that I am obsessed with Will Graham. I argued, of course, that I am merely interested in him. I want to study him. I have known since the day I met him that he has the rare potential to become one of the most fearsome killers this young country has ever seen. I would like to observe that change. Influence it to happen. I told her I am curious about him.

She reiterated her point by adding, "Obsessively."

Obsessively. At the time I thought her overly dramatic, perhaps even jealous of my attention being directed at another budding killer instead of pushing her to kill again.

It needles me to admit that she might have some insight about me that I am unable to see. But I am beginning to wonder.

That night in the woods, after Will's splendid, savage performance in the horse barn, I spoke more truth than I meant to. Yes, I want to see Will transform, to change from a humble larva to a fully developed creature that has reached its apotheosis. But what makes him different from Bedelia or Randall Tier is that if he reaches said stage in his transformation, I believe he will be able to connect with me on a level I have yet to ever experience.

There is a chance he may be able to see and know everything about me, share every secret, and… not in *spite* of what I am, but *because* of what I am…

I cannot form the thought. I cannot let the words connect, cannot allow the neurons to fire in that particular pattern lest they become used to it, wearing down the neural connections so that they flow smoother each time like the erosion of a river over a millenia, carving deeply into the earth.

The driver pulls up to Alana's driveway. Her dog, the one she adopted to ease the pain of giving Will Graham's pack of hounds back to him, is in its outdoor kennel, despite the weather. It has a doghouse, but I am certain Will's dogs will be inside tonight, tucked into their beds in front of the space heater in the hearth. Alana's dog barks incessantly at me as I

exit the vehicle to knock on her door, jumping up uselessly against its chain-link cage. Will's dogs would never – he has them perfectly trained. They like me, or they used to. It's been awhile since I've visited Wolf Trap.

Applesauce, apparently, does not appreciate my presence. I wonder if the neighbors have ever complained.

I work my mask into an appreciative smile as Alana appears at the door. Objectively, she is beautiful, her dark hair crafted into an asymmetrical curled chignon, wearing the off-the-shoulder emerald dress I helped her select, diamond studs in her ears – my gift for her recent birthday. I pay her the requisite compliments. The deep jewel-green of the dress sets off her pale skin perfectly and brings a new dimension of aqua to her eyes.

She will look lovely on my arm tonight. I've already bribed a few of the event's photographers. The two of us will feature prominently on the Arts Council's social media pages as well as the images sent out for the event's press release. I added Will to their email list, so he is sure to receive the upcoming electronic newsletter, if nothing else.

I help Alana into the black silk Balenciaga evening wrap I also selected, and we are on our way.

The opera house's lobby and adjoining lounge are halls decked for the winter holiday, a day chosen for the sun's position, for the uneasy stretch of darkness and scanty daylight and absorbed into the Christian tradition in an attempt to placate the pagans. The long night the humanity of this hemisphere faces as the solstice draws near is threatened by the thousands of twinkling lights strung along the banisters and railings, wrapped around white plastic trees edged with simulated snow. Enormous swaths of red fabric hang in the gallery, sectioning off portions of the space, creating a flawless look by covering up the odd nook or door to a custodial closet, these too trimmed with lights and glitter meant to represent ice crystals. Members of the Baltimore Symphony play a mixture of holiday fare, ranging from medieval melodies to brassy jazz. We've arrived during the cocktail hour, and after checking our coats we help ourselves to festive red and green martinis.

Mrs. Komeda and her paramour arrive, along with other friends from the opera or the arts council. Alana performs very well for them. They remember her from one of my dinner parties where we feasted on a rude man's rump roast. My bribed photographers capture a few charming candid shots.

I ask Alana to dance. She gives the perfect bashful excuses until I convince her, and we move in a gentle waltz. She is unpracticed but graceful. Another lovely photo opportunity.

That's when I see them.

Will is here, his arm linked through Frederick Chilton's as they pause to lift drinks from a passing tray. My brain pumps out a torrent of bitter adrenaline and I suffer a few moments of arrhythmia.

When I told Will about this event I did so to prove, in no uncertain terms, that I am not in need of his romantic attentions. Twice now he's mauled my pride, and I've spent many hours

chastising myself for my clumsy attempts born of desperate moments. I know it gnaws at him, my relationship with Alana, taking something he wanted, turning his most faithful defender against him. My thought was to inundate him with photos from the event, putting Alana and myself on display in front of the upper crust of Baltimore to the delight of everyone that encountered us.

Clever, vicious, petty, unpredictable boy. I have a moment of pride and deep respect before I plunge into a black rage tinged with red.

He's *here* . On Dr. Frederick Chilton's arm.

Frederick is dressed very respectably for black tie in a well-cut traditional black and white tuxedo, tailored to fit, not a line out of place. He doesn't use the cane much for walking anymore, but has one with him tonight, topped with elaborate silver, more accessory than anything. It does coordinate well, a unique statement piece, I am forced to admit – but his most notable complement tonight is the smile he wears, openly sinful, beaming with pride, a cat that ate not just one canary and got away with the crime, but a whole butter-golden flock.

Even as I want to kill him, I realize the desire to do so pales in comparison to how I want to punish Will. It's hardly Frederick's fault that he was seduced by the creature that walks at his side, one with the power to weaponize empathy and the potential to craft manipulations that may one day rival my own.

Will is so beautiful it inflicts physical pain. My arrhythmia burns my chest as cortisol and other toxic stress hormones flood my brain and seep through my body. I do not fly or fight, but I cannot force myself to move or speak, even though Mrs. Komeda has asked me a question. I can feel Alana's gaze on me like a nun's ruler cracked over my knuckles. And yet I cannot stop looking at him, a situation shared by many in the room.

I notice his hair first. How could I not? He has stepped directly in front of one of the largest Christmas trees, and the way the lights play on the chestnut strands threatens to undo my entire consciousness. He's done something to it – or had it done, more likely – to separate out the curls more than usual, bring out their shine and volume while still allowing their gentle movement as he walks or touches it casually. I bristle when Frederick's finger pushes a delicate strand behind Will's ear as they step up to the bar.

His facial hair is neatly trimmed, brows as well, more attention paid to grooming than I've ever seen. Will has embraced the suggestion of "creative black tie" on the invitation and is wearing a dark blue tuxedo, its hue a rich ultramarine. The shirt is crisp and white, contrasting with the indigo cummerbund. Where I have left behind my love of color tonight, he has abandoned his fixation on what is earthy and subdued. The cut of the clothing is exquisite. He looks simultaneously masculine, vibrant, and slender.

And he is smiling. With teeth. Not the usual pinched half-sarcastic expressions he's known for. It does something so striking to his eyes –

The universe is cold and cruel for giving him those eyes, and letting him use them against me like this.

Alana touches my arm. I murmur something in response to Mrs. Komeda's question, but I cannot tear my gaze from Will. He has a crystal glass of whiskey in his hand now, and Frederick is introducing him to someone in the psych department at the University of Maryland. He is playing his role perfectly. I am gripped by savage fury but also in awe of his bearing, that he could be like this: social. Relaxed. Easy. Generous with his smiles and witty humor that doesn't bite or sting himself or others.

And Frederick is reveling in it, basking in the glow and feasting on the attention of colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers alike. He consistently mistakes the responses to Will's charm as a direct reflection of his own worth, that he is the planet and Will only a pretty moon in his orbit. But that is to be expected; Dr. Chilton has always overestimated his own import. Even now he thinks Will has fallen for him.

I insist to myself, even as the darkness swells in me, that Will harbors not one shred of affection for him. That it is all a game.

It is impossible Will would choose Frederick Chilton over me.

Unthinkable.

Against every law of nature.

And yet: *Wanna know what Ricky's really like? Sweet.*

Therein lies the basis of my all-consuming antipathy. Fear. Marrow-deep and needle-sharp, buried in the cellar of my brain stem.

What if it's *true* ?

What if Will does care about this arrogant, deluded, tiny-minded man?

# Tantamount to Flirtation

Chapter Summary

The stunning conclusion of the charity gala evening!

**Chapter 8: Tantamount to Flirtation**

Will Graham, looking more beautiful than I have ever seen him, is here. On Frederick Chilton's arm, to the delight of all of Baltimore high society. I cannot stop staring.

Alana actually pinches the skin of the back of my hand with her recently acquired acrylic fingernails. It is clandestine but remarkably painful and I am torn from my reverie just in time. We are swept back into socializing and I force myself not to look at him. At *them* .

I throw myself into character so hard and so fast that I suffer emotional whiplash. I am charming. I treat Alana like a queen. We pose for pictures. I introduce Alana to the mayor. People with gossamer-thin connections clamor to shake my hand. Everyone is hoping to make a good enough impression to receive a dinner party invitation in the future. As they should.

I believe I might survive the evening until the art auction begins. We are seated in a gallery space created by placing chairs on the wide landing where the two marble staircases meet. I have submitted a framed drawing of the opera house's facade as part of the auction, and I want to see how much it fetches. I am halfway through describing my artistic process to Mrs. Komeda and Alana when I smell Will. Will, undoubtedly, though his scent is braided with a cologne with no ship on the bottle; Fragonard's *Homme Elegant* if my nose serves me. Nothing extravagant in price, but French-imported and made with ingredients harvested in Provence. I wonder if Frederick chose it – this I doubt, since he insists on wearing the ridiculous Dior he always reeks of, smelling like a fraternity boy on the prowl in the kind of sports bar where every wall is an enormous television.

Wood and spice blend expertly with the scent of Will's living body and my mouth waters. That is no exaggeration; I am forced to swallow quickly to avoid salivating too much.

Will and Frederick slide into chairs a mere two rows ahead of us and slightly to my right. Alana notices me noticing this and turns to watch my expression. I smile at her like nothing at all is amiss, and put my arm around her smooth shoulders.

The auction begins but I cannot make out the words. My grip on my numbered paddle is clammy, slippery with sweat. I keep my eyes on the stage as each new piece of art is

unveiled, but in my periphery I am watching them. They are laughing quietly together. Snickering, almost, like they are sharing secrets or gossip. Frederick leans close and puts his lips right next to Will's ear. Whispers something. Will laughs louder this time, then puts his hand over his mouth. "Stop!" he stage-whispers through a half-silent chuckle.

Frederick relents and leans away, one hand on his cane, the other now sliding behind Will's chair. He crooks his elbow just enough to let his fingertips brush through the base of Will's hair, right along the tender line where his neck eases up into his head, grazing his atlas and axis.

I have never wanted to touch something more in my entire life and I am consumed. I am burning up like a piece of space debris hitting the edge of the atmosphere.

My drawing sells, I don't know for how much. Neither do Will and Frederick, because during the entire bidding they've been whispering together again. Frederick pulls out a phone and turns the camera to snap a picture of the two of them. "Send it to me," I hear Will request just over the monotonous drone of Alana and Mrs. Komeda's conversation.

Another painting comes up for auction. It is a canvas print of Winslow Homer's *Dogs on a Boat.* "The one on the far left looks just like Bosco," Chilton says, raising his hand to point. When it clears their shoulders and I can see his hand is clasped in Will's.

*Buster* , I think.

"Buster," Will corrects. What he does not say, but what I know, is that the dog in the painting doesn't even bear a passing resemblance.

"That would look fetching over your fireplace," Frederick notes, and flashes his bidding paddle.

Will laughs. "It's too nice for my place."

Frederick ignores him and continues to bid. The auction is for charity, so it is no surprise that the price has become triple what the print and the gaudy frame is actually worth.

"What are you doing?" Will asks, but playfully.

The bidding slows, dries up as the price becomes more and more ridiculous for the piece. It is Frederick and two others.

And me.

I don't realize I've raised my numbered paddle, but I have.

"Not really your taste," Alana says acidly. I pretend I didn't hear her.

Frederick doesn't know who he's bidding against, because his back is to me. All he knows, it seems, is that he wants the print for Will, and is determined to have it.

I have no use for the object, but still I bid.

It's between the two of us now. When it comes to disposable income, I can't imagine Frederick has more than I do. All I have to do is wait. He'll give up soon enough.

I feel the pinch on the back of my hand again. Alana's cheeks are pink and her eyes glitter a flinty anger.

"I was driving the price up," I explain, very calmly, or so I think. "For charity."

Frederick has pledged to pay $7,000 for a print worth perhaps $900 and a frame worth even less. Still, he is visibly pleased with himself, and Will leverages it. He turns to Frederick with an incredulous smirk, shaking his head. "I can't believe you," he says lovingly.

"You're welcome," Frederick replies, basking in the jocular flirtation and the attention of those around him that lean in to comment about his purchase, congratulating his victory.

And Will turns, just enough to give me a taste of his disastrously beautiful profile, the edge of his petal lips upturned in the whisper of a triumphant smirk.

It is a miracle either of them lives through the next hour as the auction finishes. I suppose I should count myself as protected under said miracle; I survive Alana's daggered glances and double-edged remarks.

The music begins again and now there are desserts and wine. I move through the party wearing my person-suit, my attention split between maintaining my facade and watching Will as he continues to do everything in his power to defang me.

There are several holiday-themed setups throughout the event designed to make backdrops for pictures. Alana and I stand in front of the reindeer made of electric lights and smile woodenly for several photos. Will and Frederick have found the arch of faux icicles, the apex of which is decorated with a healthy sprig of mistletoe.

Mistletoe. European mistletoe, of the family Santalaceae in the order Santalales, judging by the white berries. It is a parasitic plant that attaches itself to a tree or shrub and leeches water and nutrients from the host plant. It is toxic, causing gastrointestinal and cardiac problems if ingested.

But all anyone cares about is sex. The white berries traditionally represent semen, the seed of a thunder god no less. And now, in this watered-down paganism, the kiss.

After having their picture taken once, Will turns Frederick's chin towards him and administers the appropriate action. The camera flashes again. They are both flushed with wine and smiling, unable to stop touching, it seems. As they move away from the wintertime tableau, Will catches his elbow on a fake blade of ice. "Careful, *cielito* , icicles have been known to kill people!" Frederick says, steadying him. Will just grins at him with those impossibly pretty teeth.

And I have reached my limit, the totality of my patience. My instinct at last throws off the bit and bridle and plunges into the wilderness, free at last.

That does not mean that I am frenzied or hasty. I merely surrender to what the monster wants.

***

Will had been hoping to make eye contact with Hannibal one more time before leaving. Just to drive the point home *one more time* . He wasn't anywhere in sight, even as Will navigated the crowd in the gallery and the bar under the pretext of getting their coats.

Well, there was Alana, accepting an enormous martini from the bartender and swallowing half of it in one gulp. She looked exhausted and sad. Will's heart clenched for a second or two, cramping up as he empathized with her. Things could have been so, so different between them.

He shook his head and turned back toward the coat check. Time to go home and put on some fucking sweatpants. This whole tuxedo thing was for the birds. To be honest, he'd rather have spent the evening in the straitjacket, bite mask, and strapped to the two wheeled cart. But a few hours of discomfort was more than worth the look on Hannibal's face when he'd seen Will for the first time that evening.

Where the hell was Hannibal, anyway?

By the time his brain registered that he should be alarmed, it was too late. He was walking by one of the huge red draperies hanging behind a grove of fake Christmas trees, skirting his way around a crowd of very loud opera season ticket holders who had had too much eggnog.

A hand snaked out from behind the drape and closed around the back of his jacket, yanking him expertly into the shadows beyond. Very suddenly, Will was in a small, dark alcove, the drapery hiding an unsightly set of HVAC grates, his back pressed against them. Hannibal pinned him expertly, a hand clamped over his mouth, the other snarled in the fabric of his jacket.

He braced himself, expecting to be disemboweled back here, no one the wiser until they took down the decorations or smelled his body rotting.

No knife.

Hannibal's face was coldly murderous, but he slowly removed his hand from Will's mouth. Will stayed frozen where he was, breathing hard, drowning in his scent, ears full of his rabbiting heart. Hannibal's eyes were cosmos-black, the same color as his clothing. He looked fierce and pale and inhuman.

*And beautif–*

*Stop. Don't think it.*

Hannibal's expression now was unreadable. It had melted into something he didn't recognize, though the little muscle in his jaw was pulsing away. The hand that had been over Will's mouth crept along the side of his face now, the fingers trembling but warm.

They closed around the back of Will's neck, caressing the velvet place right along his hairline. He could feel the brush of each individual fingertip – pointer, middle, ring – then lost them in sensation as Hannibal slid his hand into Will's hair, helping himself to a fistful. What began as a sensual stroke turned into a snarled pull that sent confusing tremors through Will's body, alerting both his pain and pleasure receptors. Will instinctively grabbed Hannibal's wrist, the one attached to the hand still holding him by the lapel.

Hannibal eased up, exhaling as if stepping back from a precipice. He didn't let go, and his hands and posture softened. There was something so delicate in his expression now that it was almost worse than seeing him in a cold rage.

*Don't,* he told himself.

*Seriously, don't.*

*DON'T.*

*What the fuck are you doing…?*

Despite the screaming voices in his head – and maybe because of them, just to be ornery – Will found his free hand moving up. Closer. Now cupping the side of Hannibal's face, marveling at the unearthly smooth texture of his skin. Now leaning in, pushing up on his toes just an inch or so.

Will kissed him.

Through his lips and the press of his hand on Hannibal's face, he felt a deep, profound *uncoiling* move through Hannibal's body, the ambient pulse of empathy ringing with sweet relief.

The first chase press of lips ended and another began. The hand in his hair tightened again and he admitted Hannibal's tongue, that hot, wet muscle tasting his mouth in delicate increments.

Giving in was the sweetest peace he'd ever known.

His phone buzzed in his jacket pocket.

It had to be Frederick, wondering where he was.

*Will* didn't know where the fuck he was. He and Hannibal existed outside of space and time and in a shadowy realm of endless possibility and infinite danger.

Hannibal tasted like ruin. And ruin tasted better than anything Will had ever eaten before.

The phone buzzed again.

Will pulled back and dropped his hands to his sides. They breathed in tandem. Hannibal's face was warmed by an almost boyish blush. Will felt heat spreading over every inch of his skin. Cooled, as rationality battled back.

“Let go of me,” he growled.

Hannibal didn’t move.

“Let go.” Will made it sound like a threat, but he also was fully aware that if Hannibal refused, there was nothing he could do about it with his back to the wall.

But Hannibal complied, though his grip loosened in maddeningly slow increments. “Will,” he breathed.

Will edged away and slipped out from behind the curtain without looking back.

***

Frederick was on his elbows and knees, ass in the air, clutching a pillow as Will gripped his hips and continued his thrusting, his cock sliding in and out with the kind of ease that came with practice.

Frederick moaned, his breath catching for a moment.

Will slowed down, but barely. “You okay?” he panted his question.

“Fine, thanks,” Frederick replied breathily. Will sped up again, splaying his hand over Frederick’s back. “Will—!”

Will responded to his name being moaned by delivering a heavy-handed slap on the ass.

“What’s gotten into you?” Frederick smirked over his shoulder.

Will shook his head. “What?”

“You’re pounding me like construction equipment.”

“You want me to stop?”

“No, absolutely not,” Frederick promised. “It feels incredible, it’s just not like you.”

Will let the slap of flesh on flesh do the talking for a while before leaning forward again and stroking Frederick from the front. The added stimulation drove him to the edge. Will let go and kept on thrusting against what he thought was the sweet spot. His hard work paid off and Frederick climaxed with an unchained groan of pleasure.

Will kept fucking him until he felt like his legs were gonna give out. He closed his eyes and pictured a swath of red fabric, conjuring the phantom scent of Hannibal’s cologne. That was all it took for him to spend with a deep moan of his own.

“You beast,” Frederick teased, pulling Will into his arms. “I’m surprised you had so much energy after tonight. You must have been pent up for ages.”

“Sorry if I was rough.”

“On the contrary. There’s nothing really like a vigorous railing.” Frederick sat up on his elbow and traced Will’s nipple. “You should try it sometime,” he suggested coyly.

“What, you buy me a painting and now you think you get to fuck me?”

“Will,” Chilton scolded. “When we became intimate I was very clear that I expected each of us to play a variety of roles in the bedroom. I was rather upfront about it.” He leaned in and kissed Will. “Saving yourself for marriage?”

“No,” Will denied. “I’m just not… ready yet.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Chilton dismissed. “You’re missing out.” He cupped his hand around Will’s ass and squeezed. “And so am I for that matter.” With a pouty sigh, he got up and went to the bathroom.

To avoid any further discussion, Will rolled onto his side and fell asleep.

# A Freshman Pulling at a Panty Girdle

Chapter Summary

First therapy session after the gala...

**Chapter 9: A Freshman Pulling at a Panty Girdle**

"So." Will broke the silence that lay over them like a lead blanket, the kind that afforded protection from cancer-causing radiation. Time to let the atoms in and let the tumors grow. He leaned back in his chair, gripping it with clammy hands.

It was his first appointment since the gala. He'd come expecting to feel a pleasant anticipation, eager to ask Hannibal how it went, if he and Alana had had a good time. Ready to lie and say Frederick had bought the tickets as a surprise for him, not the other way around. Ready to tell him all about the new painting in his living room. Maybe even about the ass pounding he gave Chilton after.

But no words were coming out. And Hannibal hadn't spoken since he'd arrived except to say, "Hello, Will."

"So," Hannibal mirrored back at him.

Silence. The blanket descended again.

Will tried to wait it out, but his resolve crumbled. "Aren't you going to ask me a question?" Irritation bled into his voice.

"What kind of question should I ask?"

Will scoffed incredulously, rolling his eyes. "I don't know, something therapist-y. Like, uh… 'how was your week?' An oldie but a goldie."

Hannibal let the silence stretch again into a taut, blade-thin thing like a violin string. Then he said, "How was your week?"

"Good," Will said.

Silence.

Hannibal crossed his legs. "I do have a question for you, Will." The smooth confidence of his words set off warning bells in Will's head.

“Go for it,” he challenged with a little sneer that likely betrayed his anxiety.

Hannibal looked him straight in the eyes. Will felt half-hypnotized by them. “Why did you kiss me?” Hannibal asked, his tone gentle but clinical.

“No. No, no, n-no, no, you don’t get to ask me that in your fucking *therapy* voice,” Will spat back.

A long pause, bloated with rancor and guilt and longing.

Hannibal crossed the other leg now, but leaned back in a posture that was a few degrees more casual. Personal. “Why did you kiss me, Will?” This time, Will thought, he let the rough edge linger on the words, telegraphing just a shred or two of vulnerability.

“To save my life,” Will lied. “The Chesapeake Ripper just pulled me into a dark alcove and slammed me into a wall.”

Will didn’t believe it coming out of his own mouth, and he was certain Hannibal didn’t, either, especially the way his pale eyebrow twitched.

“To get it over with,” Will tried again. The fucking silence – the clock ticking, the whisper of traffic outside, the deafening quietude – he couldn’t take it. And Hannibal probably knew that very well. “You tried twice now. There’s obviously something… weird going on between us and I thought I’d, uh… tear off the band-aid, I guess.”

“And when you tore off the bandage, what did you find?” Hannibal asked. “What kind of wound was beneath?”

“Psychosomatic,” Will said. “Nothing there. Or if it had been, it was healed.”

Lies, lies, lies.

“What did *you* find?” Deflection again.

Hannibal considered the question for what felt like a long time. The silence made Will itch as Hannibal glanced around the room as if in thought. Then he locked eyes with Will again.

“I found that you’re a good kisser, Will. I’m tempted to correct that statement to ‘excellent,’ but I would need further interaction to give you such high marks.” He waited to see Will’s reaction, to be sure. Will refused to give him one. “How was it that you described Alana to me once, when you drove over an hour in a blizzard to tell me you’d made romantic advances toward her?” He answered his own question. “I believe you said she was *kissable* .”

“Well, you’d know if I was right about that or not, wouldn’t you?”

“You’re very kissable, Will. Hence my previous attempts.”

Will stood up with an agitated huff. “Yet again, I still don’t understand what your deal is. You’ve done… unspeakable fucking things to me, and now you want to *kiss* me?”

“And you wanted to kiss me,” Hannibal reminded him.

“Did I?” Will stood to furiously pace, taking his hands through his hair. “You manhandled me behind a curtain where there were no witnesses and then-then you… touched me. Like you did after the horse thing.”

“I did,” Hannibal admitted. It was such a simple admission it felt like a bucket of cold water being splashed in Will’s face. “And I waited.”

“You *waited* .”

“I waited,” Hannibal repeated.

Will was formulating an answer — failing, if he was being honest — when, blessedly, his phone rang. He almost always kept it on silent, but had it set so that his neighbor Karla’s number always rang through. He answered, despite Hannibal’s look of disapproval. “Karla, hi — I’m at an appointment.”

“Think you oughta come home — I came over to let the dogs out and Zoe won’t get up. She’s been vomiting, too.”

“Oh shit — okay, I’ll be right there.”

“I’ll stay with her until you get home,” Karla promised.

Will hung up. “I have to go,” he said. “One of the dogs is sick.”

“Which one?”

“Zoe.”

Hannibal’s brow furrowed. “She’s already frail.”

“I know,” Will said, putting on his coat. He left without another word.

A few hours later, Will held Zoe tightly for a few moments before placing her in the arms of the vet tech. “We’ll take good care of her, Mr. Graham, don’t you worry,” she promised.

The woman in scrubs and the dog disappeared back into the hall behind reception. Will sank into an uncomfortable plastic chair with a sigh and took a second to breathe, then pulled out his phone. There was a text from a contact titled 💖RICKY❤️‍🔥. *Are you fashionably late or standing me up?*

“Fuck,” Will muttered in the empty waiting room. He called the number. It rang twice before Frederick picked up.

“Will. I’m assuming you put your car in the ditch or were mugged or something equally traumatic? It’s been 45 minutes.”

“Hey, I’m sorry,” Will apologized. “I got a call from Karla. Zoe started throwing up and didn’t stop until she basically passed out. I’m at the vet with her. They think it’s a bowel obstruction but they won’t know until they get in there.”

“Oh.” Frederick sighed into the phone, and his disappointment beamed down from the satellite directly into Will’s ear. “I’m sorry to hear that, of course. Pity, it took me a month to get this reservation. Dorsia is very exclusive.”

“I know.” Will tried to keep the irritation out of his voice.

“Perhaps your neighbor could pick her up after the procedure is over? If you leave now you might make it for dessert.”

*Never mind that Zoe might not live through the night,* Will’s mind shrieked, but he wisely kept his mouth shut. “I can’t ask her to do that. I’m running low on favors.”

Chilton sighed again. “Well, perhaps we can reschedule for sometime in the summer. That’s how long it will take to get another reservation.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

A tense silence followed. “Well, I hope she’s feeling better soon.”

“Me too.”

“Goodnight, Will.”

“‘Night. I’ll, uhm, call you tomorrow.”

They hung up. Will lowered his head into his hands and tried to swallow down the lump that had formed in his throat. At first, he tried to tell himself it was because of Zoe. She and Max were the first dogs he’d adopted after moving to Virginia. She’d ended up being a lot older than the shelter had estimated, and was reaching the end of her natural life span. She wasn’t the smartest, the liveliest, certainly not the cutest. But she had always been calm, affectionate, and reliable, a constant presence at the house in Wolf Trap, preferring to lay on the floor of whatever room Will was in, not asking to be petted or played with. Just wanted to be in his presence.

Will dragged his sleeve over his eye. That was what love was, he thought. That’s what it really was.

About an hour into the surgery, the door to the clinic opened, despite the late hour. Will glanced up and went rigid with unwelcome surprise.

It was Hannibal, wearing his overcoat. Apparently he’d gotten his scarf back from Alana. He had a paper cup with the name of a gas station printed on it in his hand, for some reason, topped with a long red straw.

“What are you doing here?” Will demanded, flinching as Hannibal came closer.

“I came to wait with you,” Hannibal said, as if it really was just that simple. He handed Will the cup. “Gas station sweet tea with no ice. You’ve displayed a fondness for it in the past.”

Will looked at the cup like it was an ancient artifact just unearthed from an archaeological dig. He realized, then, how thirsty he was. Even though it went against everything he’d trained himself to do in Hannibal’s presence, to thwart him at every turn, he put the straw to his lips and drank. It was heaven in his throat.

Hannibal sat in the plastic chair right next to him. No invitation, but he moved slowly enough that Will had ample time to protest if he’d wanted to.

He didn’t.

Hannibal smelled like his cologne and the fresh sharpness of winter air. “What’s the prognosis?”

“Bowel obstruction. Far as I know, she, ah, didn’t eat anything out of the ordinary, so it might be a tumor.” Will shrugged, not looking at him, but taking another drink of tea. “They have to open her up to see, I guess.”

Hannibal nodded.

They sat for a long time, Will pretending to watch the muted HGTV show that was playing on the television in the corner of the waiting room.

“They’re going to regret that wallpaper,” Hannibal said after the dramatic room makeover was revealed.

Will snorted a weird, unexpected laugh. “Yeah, they are.” He paused for a commercial, then ventured, “Do *you* have any regrets?”

“About my decorating decisions? No.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Will said.

“I know,” Hannibal admitted.

Will inhaled deeply, then let it out in little increments, leaning back and studying the ceiling. “I’m riddled with regrets,” he said. “People I should have protected. Listened to. Avoided like the plague.” He took a drink of his tea.

“I regret,” Hannibal told him. “I have the capacity to regret. I never used to. That has changed as of late.”

“Really.” It wasn’t a question, the word flat and disbelieving.

Hannibal nodded. “I regret not being more honest with myself.”

“Hard to do that when all you do is lie. So good at it with, uh, other people so-so why not yourself?” If Hannibal was going to show him the hilt of the knife so blatantly, then Will was

going to give it a twist.

“A habit of obfuscation can be hard to break,” Hannibal relented. “Still, I gave myself more credit for self-knowledge.”

“Huh. So… now that you find yourself capable of regret…”

Hannibal looked at him directly now. “It would please you if I harbored regrets,” he said.

“Keen observation, Doctor.”

“You want to hear them,” Hannibal stated. “You want the words.”

“Yes.”

“It would give you satisfaction.”

“Oh, undoubtedly,” Will promised, closing his hands tightly around the arms of the chair.

“Even if I do not regret the specific things you would like me to mention?”

Will didn’t answer, just waited.

“When I decide to do or not to do something, I usually have a very good reason,” Hannibal said. “Lately, I have been unable to see the bigger picture. The fate of the dominoes after the first one is toppled.”

“You don’t regret the actions leading up to the result, but the result itself,” Will clarified after drinking the paper cup dry, fully aware of how sexual it was to be sucking on the straw like that.

If Hannibal noticed, he made no sign. “I regret,” he said, “driving you into Frederick Chilton’s arms.”

Will put the cup down to give himself time to think. “You drove me there… what, through drugging and manipulation? Plant the, uh, seed in my mind while I was burning up with encephalitis? Can’t see any reason why you’d do that, but what the fuck do I know about your reasoning half the time.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Will doubled down. “You think the whole world revolves around you? That you’re the only reason I’m with him?”

Hannibal’s brow wrinkled slightly in a *well, yes, obviously,* gesture.

“Couldn’t be that I just want to be happy, no. Couldn’t be that I actually like him. Somebody who, uh, at the first sign of a fever put on his coat and wanted to take me to the hospital instead of letting my brain burn. God forbid I want to be with someone who won’t *manipulate* me.”

“Can’t manipulate you,” Hannibal corrected. “He doesn’t have the intelligence required. Even if he can get into your head, he can only stumble blindly through it.”

“There’s a sense of safety there, then, I suppose,” Will said with a tilt of his head. “You assume that I’m using Frederick the same way you’re using Alana, but not everyone is like you. And not everything is about you.”

“You and I are just alike,” Hannibal argued.

“No, we’re not,” Will insisted in return, breaking eye contact and focusing on the glowing TV instead, not really seeing it, the colors blurring together. A dismissive gesture.

At last, Hannibal got up and put on his coat, buttoning it slowly as if waiting for Will to say something else. Will stubbornly stared at the happy family gasping in joyous surprise at their newly renovated home.

“Please text me when Zoe’s surgery is finished,” Hannibal requested softly. “Let me know how she fared.”

Will nodded, nearly imperceptibly. Hannibal left.

Later, when Will was home, Zoe asleep on her bed next to his, Will surprised himself by picking up the phone and typing the requested message.

*Zoe did great. She must have eaten a candy wrapper at the dog park on Tuesday. She’ll be fine.*

Even though it was after midnight, he got a response within a minute.

*I’m glad to hear that. Thank you for letting me know.*

Will typed and deleted several things, then finally settled on *Goodnight.*

*Goodnight, Zoe. Will.*

# Yes, I Have an Agenda

Chapter Summary

Hannibal follows Will and Chilton to the FBI Christmas party.

**Chapter 10: Yes, I Have an Agenda**

Tonight is the Behavioral Science Unit's holiday party. It will be a lackluster scene of agency-condoned celebration, complete with gut-churning American food full of sugar or cheese, cheap alcohol, and Christmas music of dubious taste – specifically the unavoidable "All I Want for Christmas is You." It's hard for me to imagine a gathering I would enjoy less. If forced to choose, I'd rather have a four-hour therapy session with poor, neurotic Franklyn Froidiveaux.

But I know Will will be there. I overheard him mention it to Mr. Zeller in the hallway last week. It was unclear whether he was bringing Dr. Chilton. And for reasons I do not entirely understand, I feel compelled to find out if they plan to attend together.

I have a late appointment that night, a patient I have rescheduled twice now. It would be unspeakably rude to do so again, so I keep the meeting. When I have finished, the party has already started. After my patient has gone, I check my phone. My message to Alana, asking her if she'd like to go to the party, has been read for over an hour, but she has not responded. I suspected as much – my behavior has pushed her to her limits, I think. It may be some time before she grants me any type of courtesy, and I can't blame her. She may be blind, and I've worked very hard to blind her, but she is not stupid. And my ability to obfuscate is decimated by Will's manipulations of me.

I'm not entirely sure I've even been invited to this party, and without Alana, I surely should not attend.

Still, I stop home and change into something more casual, swapping out the suit for slacks, a white collared shirt, and a red sweater, re-style my hair. I indulge in a glass of wine to calm my nerves, and get into the Bentley, driving off towards what I'm sure is my ruin. And yet, I am undeterred.

The gathering is in a bleak chain restaurant, rented for the evening, supplied with bartenders and "catering," though I use the term loosely. The space has been decorated with cheap plastic decorations and strung with lights. The situation is worse than I initially expected; there is a karaoke machine in one corner with a DJ who looks like he may be on work release from prison.

I feel my blood pumping through my temples when I see a small table near the bar glowing with small red votive candles. Upon it is a framed picture of Beverly Katz. A jar next to it holds donations for the memorial scholarship her family has created in her honor.

It is not that I feel guilt – she was too clever and paid the price. *Contrapasso* . I had to send Will a message. He put her in harm's way. I always admired Ms. Katz's intellect and courage and I made sure her end was as painless as possible. Besides, Abigail already had her hands full helping me with Miriam, so keeping her alive but subdued was not an option.

I don't feel guilt. I am irritated that Will must have seen this little shrine and is likely thinking of new ways to destroy me, despite the role he himself played in Ms. Katz's demise.

Despite the somber memorial, everyone has been helping themselves to libations and fried food for close to two hours now. I quickly ingratiate myself with a table of middle-aged secretaries, flirting as needed, so that I may camouflage myself at their corner table and watch.

Brian Zeller is dressed up as a thin St. Nicholas with dark stubble, moving from table to table offering red and green jello shots or little bottles of liquor with bows tied on top. Jimmy Price is in attendance with a man who is obviously his boyfriend. They are wearing matching reindeer pajamas with red noses and antler headbands and do little else besides take pictures of themselves at various angles and sing a karaoke duet version of "Baby, It's Cold Outside."

And there he is. Will.

There *they* are. Will and Dr. Chilton. In a booth off to the side, crammed together on one bench seat, leaving the opposite side of the table open. People come and go, making conversation. Jack. Jimmy. Chilton says no to the jello shot, but Will gamely tries one, though he asks Frederick to choose red or green for him. They haven't seen me. All the better.

I listen with one ear as Gayle from HR tells me about her cat, Mr. Business, who has just been diagnosed with diabetes. It's easy enough for me to pretend to interact as I watch. Dr. Chilton is wearing a black suit jacket, but has allowed his holiday spirit to emerge by pairing it with a red dress shirt, a little piece of evergreen clipped to his lapel. Will is far more subdued this evening, dressed as usual in green flannel. When Jimmy comes around and tries to put another set of reindeer antlers on him, he shies away and refuses, though it is with a little smile. Overall, however, he seems bored. Then sad, as he is forced to pass by Beverly's photo on the way to the bar for another Bells Two-Hearted ale.

He returns with the drink, and a water for Frederick, who must be driving, or avoiding the atrocious holiday margaritas and bottom-shelf liquor. My skin prickles with heat when Frederick leans over to speak into his ear, smoothing back a curl. Still, it is in no way the display from the gala.

Eventually, Jack has the DJ turn off the music and takes the microphone. He thanks everyone for coming, then says, "I also have some news I'd like to share. As many of you know, my wife Bella was diagnosed with lung cancer. We were pretty worried about her, and I want to

thank you all for your thoughts and prayers and casseroles – yes, Gayle, your beefaroni was spectacular. I'm delighted to let you all know that she's now in remission."

Applause and cheering. I clap my hands with enthusiasm. I've always liked Bella Crawford. She is a woman of old-fashioned manners and bearing that I find charming. Exquisite taste in perfume. In contrast is Gayle, who smells like a shopping mall.

"She wanted me to pass on that she wishes you all a very happy holiday, and she'll be here in person next year. Now, I have a little treat for you all. Many of you know Dr. Frederick Chilton. But did you know that he used to be a camp counselor at a performing arts summer program with a specialty in musical theater?"

Drunken laughter in the crowd. Jimmy Price puts his fingers in his mouth and whistles.

"And he's here tonight. Dr. Chilton, come up and sing us a song, please! Help us get in the holiday spirit!"

I look over at Will and Chilton. Will is laughing, genuinely, I think, his cheeks flushed, flashing teeth. Dr. Chilton pretends for approximately two and a half seconds that he's too embarrassed to comply with Jack's suggestion before getting out of the booth and fairly snatching the microphone out of Jack's hand. He tells the DJ his song selection, then says, "I'm far too sober for this."

The crowd laughs. Will rests his elbow on the back of the booth and watches, pale eyes shining, catching the star-like reflections of the twinkling holiday lights strung up all around.

The song begins. " *Sleigh bells ring, are you listenin' – in the lane, snow is glistenin'...* "

And Frederick *can sing* .

Beautifully, in fact, and I am impressed before I am plunged into a whirlpool of jealousy. He leaves the stage with the wireless microphone to work the crowd, but more than anything, he is singing to Will. " *A beautiful sight, we're happy tonight, walkin' in a winter wonderland…* "

I have no doubt that in the realm of music, I could best Frederick. I play half a dozen instruments at a mastery level. I can transcribe music by listening alone and my eidetic memory allows me to play almost anything from a vast catalog that exists in my mind.

But I am not a naturally gifted singer. In fact, I find it difficult to carry a tune. It wasn't always so – after Mischa died and I didn't speak for over two years at the orphanage, my voice withered from disuse. It coincided with puberty and I never learned to re-master it. The best I can manage is to hum notes.

But here is Frederick Chilton putting his hand affectionately at Will's shoulder over the back of the booth and singing, " *In the meadow we could build a snowman and pretend that he is Parson Brown, he'll say, 'are you married?' and we'll say 'no man, but you can do the job while you're in town!* '" Will is blushing from the attention of the others in the room, but I can tell he's pleased.

Gayle sighs wistfully at my side. “Isn’t that adorable? Too bad he plays for the other team, right ladies?”

Sharon, Karen, Cathy, and Tyffani murmur dreamily in agreement.

Enough. I am going to murder Dr. Chilton first thing tomorrow morning.

As soon as that thought crosses my mind, as if by some form of black magic, Will glances my way and happens to see me. I watch recognition ripple over his features, the deepening red of his cheeks. Then a smile plucks the corner of his mouth and he turns back to Frederick, grinning up at him as he sings with a look of pure beatific adoration.

When the song is over, Will clambers out of the booth to kiss Frederick after he hands off the microphone. There are more cheers and whistles from the crowd, despite the whispers of, “Well, I never saw *that* coming! I didn’t think they got along!”

Will has had a few drinks, it’s true, but the way he acts now, pivoting from subdued appreciation for Dr. Chilton’s presence to bordering on the inappropriate is interesting indeed. As they watch their coworkers make fools of themselves, half turned in their booth, Will slides an arm beneath Frederick’s arm and splays a hand on his chest, nuzzling his neck. Frederick delights in the attention, of course, and accepts more kisses, even as they begin to drift into carnal territory. I can’t see below the table, but I imagine Will’s hand is likely on Frederick’s thigh, headed north towards its target.

And, as I suspected, Will glances my direction, just a flick of his eyes. He wants me to see. Wants me to be consumed with jealousy.

But I don’t take the bait. My agitation has bled away, though watching Will and thinking about him giving me the same treatment is arousing enough to bring about a physical response. I merely smile.

I smile because I know.

It’s psychology 101. Undergraduate level theory.

The subject’s behavior changes when the subject is aware of the observer.

At the gala, I couldn’t be sure that Will had known I was watching during some of the evening. But the contrast is so sharp and distinctive here that there is no doubt in my mind whatsoever.

And to think, the words *not everything is about you* fell from those pretty lips mere days ago.

Will keeps glancing my way, no doubt hoping to catch an expression of discomfort, distaste, envy. He is all but seducing Frederick now, murmuring in his ear, playing with his hair, kissing him, grazing his fingers over his neck. It’s working. I can see the blush rising to Frederick’s cheeks, his self-assured, arrogant smiles.

I suppose I won’t kill him. It wouldn’t be fair. He has no idea, none whatsoever, that he’s being used. Toyed with, puppeteered by someone he’d once held prisoner in his hospital.

Someone he might have feelings for, if there is any room left to love Will in Dr. Chilton's heart. So much of his cardiac real estate is taken up with love for himself, and the deep-seated insecurity that ego is meant to staunch.

Will is not receiving the reaction he wants from me. I am chatting pleasantly with my flock of administrative assistants. Who could have imagined that Mr. Business was once in an honest-to-God commercial that aired on local TV? It is satisfying on every level. Will's frustration, that is – not Mr. Business's short-lived acting career.

When Will and Frederick stand up from their seats in the booth, I am not surprised. I expected them to leave not long after Will realized he was unable to get my proverbial goat. Not only that, now I revel in the knowledge that the entire charade has been for my benefit, a performance with an audience of one.

But they do not take their coats with them when they go. Will has Frederick by the hand, whispering in his ear again. Frederick slings a possessive arm around his waist and they disappear down the hall toward the restaurant's kitchen.

I tense my muscles to follow, or at least get closer to see if I can discern the reason for their errand, but Gayle has just pulled out her phone and shoves it under my face to look at a series of pictures of Mr. Business and his flatmates Jean Paw'd Van Damme and Pinkeye. I manage to escape but run into Jack, who wants to talk about a case for a few minutes. By the time I'm able to extend my well-wishes to Bella, Will and Frederick have re-entered the bar and are ordering drinks.

They return to their table and I return to mine. Tyffani returns from the washroom with fresh circus pink lipstick and a grin on her face. "These Christmas parties always get soooooo crazy," she tells me. "Somebody broke the baby changing table in the bathroom!"

The women howl with laughter, the implication clear.

Just as I am able to metabolize this new bit of information, Jimmy stops by to take a picture with Will and Frederick. When the flash goes off, I see it.

All of the victory I felt in realizing that Will is performing for me drains away. The pleasure of my self-assurance and the warmth of my importance in his life goes icy in half a breath. Frigid becomes burning. I cannot stop the flush of fury climbing up my cheeks.

There is a suck-bruise on Will's neck, livid and purple.

And I am consumed by the same unhinged monstrousness I felt at the gala. Powerless again. Only this time, I feel little remorse in letting it take me.

This is what Will wants, and so it is what he shall have. These days, it is difficult to deny him anything.

I make a few excuses and put on my coat, exit the restaurant, and get into my car. Fortune would have it that there is an open spot next to Will's Volvo. I turn off the Bentley and get

out, crouching on the snow at the front bumper, and wait. It is cold tonight, but I do not feel it. The Ripper is not concerned with the elements or the pins and needles in his legs.

Jimmy's boyfriend and Karen from the tip hotline come outside to smoke. I wait until they're almost finished and then slam a heavy chunk of ice into the front bumper of Will's car. The alarm goes off, causing my unsuspecting accomplices to jump. They snuff their cigarettes and return to the restaurant. I get back in the Bentley to wait.

A minute or two later, Will comes outside, clawing on his coat. I watch him in the rear view mirror as he tries to disable the alarm with his key fob. It doesn't work, so he gets in and starts the engine, which silences it. He cuts the ignition and moves to get out. As he does, he looks through the window and sees me in the driver's seat of my own vehicle. The little smile returns to his face, quirking up one corner of his mouth as his breath crystalizes in the cold air, making a vapor halo for his curls.

I roll down the window. "I know what you're doing, Will," I tell him, my voice liquid but dangerous.

"Yeah? Huh." He stands up and looks at the restaurant for a moment, then turns. I think he's going to abandon me altogether and go back inside. Instead, he pauses to take off his coat, and then gets in the back seat of the Bentley on the passenger's side.

I wait for him to pull a gun and put it to my head. But he doesn't, just brings his hands to his mouth and blows on them, rubbing them together to warm them up.

Well.

I get out of the driver's seat and re-enter the rear seat of the vehicle.

"You got it all figured out?" Will's smile is cunning and ironic now, but I can sense something beneath it as though his expression were made of lace. "What exactly am I, uh… *up to* , Dr. Lecter?"

"You're playing a game," I say. I want to tell him what I know, what I saw, the change in his behavior when he knew I was watching. How jealous he wanted to make me, not as penance for those I've killed or for imprisoning him. Not anymore. Now it's become pathological.

And like most people with a sexual fetish, he won't want to fully admit that he finds my jealousy arousing. But I know he does.

It would be satisfying to pour all of this out and even the playing field. But not as satisfying as keeping my mouth shut and letting what happens next occur naturally. I'm curious beyond all measure.

"Game?" He cocks his head and blinks with blue-eyed innocence that is rife with contradiction. "What game am I playing?"

I reach out and snatch his chin, squeezing it hard enough that he grunts softly, the insides of his cheeks no doubt pressing painfully into his teeth. I tilt his head to the side and push down

his collar with my other hand. “This game,” I say, examining the suck-bruise again.

“If we’re keeping score,” Will says, “I think I’m winning.”

Deliberate provocation. It works.

I twist my hand in his collar and snag my other in his hair and this time *I* kiss *him* . There is no patience left. No waiting.

Instead of protesting, or shying away from this kind of forceful treatment, he answers in kind, clambering gracelessly into my lap with his knees on either side.

We are two starving men at last granted sustenance. We have the shared singular thought to consume. Our greedy kisses leave us breathless, as does our grip on one another – I am holding him so tightly, pressed against me, that his ribs are compressed. His cold hand has burrowed beneath my sweater and shirt and is clutching desperately at any flesh it can find, gripping my back, my stomach, up into my chest hair that he strokes and pulls in tandem, finds my nipple with the pad of his thumb. Sweet, feral moments I simultaneously experience and save in the memory palace.

It is utterly clear, to both of us, I imagine, that this is not enough. Ill advised, wrong place, wrong time, but I want him naked and on my bare body more than I want my next breath of air. “I want you,” is all I can say. A dozen languages, thousands of papers and articles written, a library of journals and patient notes, and my entire life has come down to those three monosyllabic words.

And in response to this rare gift, the complete baring of my soul, he says, “I can’t. I can’t, I h-have… I have to go–”

My response is to bite him, hard, right over the suck-bruise that Dr. Chilton left behind. He cries out and it echoes beautifully in the Bentley’s interior as he paws at my hair, trying to get a fistful to pull me away. Then his fingers relax as I suck hard on his skin, a promise of what he could have if he stays with me. His moan drips with desire.

This buys me another minute of frantic kissing and a hand cupped around my swollen cock, fingertips running up my inseam. But it is not enough to convince him to stay.

He is thinking, I’m sure, of the memorial to Beverly Katz, of his lonely nights spent in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. And despite what his body clearly wants, he slides off of me, gets his coat, and goes back inside, wrapping his scarf around his neck.

He wants me to suffer. And I am suffering, panting in the back seat of the Bentley, reduced, he no doubt hopes, to the indignity of masturbating in a chain restaurant parking lot.

This is Will’s design.

I won’t give him that satisfaction. I get behind the wheel and drive, my mind still racing through the images and sensations of his nearness, despite the blood still pooling between my legs, the ache of my desire. The pain, emotional and physical, is acute. And as infuriated and

frustrated as I am, I cannot help but admire the way he's playing the game, led by some kind of inner demon that will stop at nothing to ruin me, free of self-preservation, free of morality.

Clever, vicious boy. Enchanted and reckless. Delighting in wickedness.

Will, emerging from the chrysalis in his fully-developed glory, spreading his wings.

That, I believe, is the Will Graham that could love me.

There must be a way for both of us to win this game.

The prize being one another.

# Ah Yes, That Thing You Do

Chapter Summary

Frederick Chilton has a secret room in his basement, but it's NOT a sex dungeon.

**Chapter 11: Ah Yes, That Thing You Do**

Will came back upstairs from the basement and returned to the kitchen, where his open tool box sat on the counter. “All right, water’s back on. Ready to test it?”

Frederick rolled up his sleeves and dropped a stalk of celery into the newly replaced garbage disposal. Turning on the faucet, he flipped the switch and watched with visual satisfaction as the vegetable twirled around before being reduced to a pulp and washed away. He flipped the switch again, then let Will at the sink to wash his hands.

“Masterfully done. You’ve no idea how I suffered without one.”

“Poor baby,” Will comforted with a twist of irony as Frederick kissed him briefly, hands resting on his midsection. “What you’ve been through.”

“Thank you.”

“Welcome.” Will closed up his tool box. “That, uh… counts as your Christmas present, right?”

Frederick made a little sound of disbelief as he uncorked a bottle of wine. “It’s a little early in the relationship for you to be taking me for granted, young man.”

“Acts of service is, uh… one of those love languages, isn’t it?”

“So is this.” Frederick kissed him again, squeezed his ass, then handed him a glass of wine.

They drank in a little moment of quiet. Will licked his lips, then met Frederick’s gaze again. “So, what’s in the locked room downstairs?”

“You were snooping? I didn’t know I was dating a snoop.” Frederick’s voice was immediately flustered as he backed up and crossed his arms.

Interesting.

Will sipped his wine and tipped back to rest his hips against the granite counter top. “Got something to hide? I, ah… don’t deal well with *something to hide* , Ricky. Could say I’m just a *little* gun shy.”

Frederick sighed. “Understandably, I suppose.”

“Is it a sex dungeon?”

Frederick relaxed in increments, picking up his glass again. “That sounded… very optimistic, Mr. Graham.”

“I’m just saying, if it’s a sex dungeon, you don’t have to, uhm… keep the door locked. Unless there’s already someone in there…?”

“For heaven’s sake, Will, it’s not a sex dungeon,” Frederick said with a little huff. He leaned against the counter next to Will, not looking at him. “It is merely a place where I go to meditate.”

Will waited, hoping he’d say more, but before long, he was impatient. “Can I see it?”

“I’m not sure I’m ready to show it to you. It’s a bit… unorthodox.” He glanced at Will sidelong. “Besides, you know all about ‘I’m not ready.’”

“Guess it’d be a bit hypocritical for me to push, then, huh?” Will set his glass to the side, playing with the crystal stem. “What are you afraid of?”

“What are *you* afraid of?” Frederick fired back, raising his eyebrows.

“Intimacy,” Will said immediately. “Pain. Sharing something with someone that I’ve never shared before.”

“But you know I’d make you feel wonderful,” Frederick argued.

“Likewise.”

Frederick stuck out a pouting lip, crossing his arms again. “All right,” he grumbled.

“What’s that?” Will pretended not to have heard.

“I said ‘all right.’” Frederick heaved a sigh and took Will’s hand, headed for the stairs. They went through the wine cellar, past the fitness room, and stopped at a door across from the unfinished part of the basement where the utilities were. The door had a key pad, and the magic numbers were 1984.

Chilton took a breath. “Please promise,” he said, “that you won’t laugh. And that you won’t tell anyone.”

“I promise,” Will said with a nod.

Frederick seemed to steel himself, and pushed the door open, flipping on a light.

In front of them looked like a teenager's bedroom out of a John Hughes movie. There was a single bed with a worn-looking red bedspread and black and white checkered sheets. A small desk held a vintage TV, complete with rabbit ears, and another shelf housed a turntable, a cassette tape boombox, and rows and rows of tapes and vinyl albums. A couple of deflated-looking bean bags sat on remnants of brown shag carpeting. The blue walls were covered with posters and pictures, most of them music related – The Cure, Blondie, Simple Minds, Culture Club, New Order, Bow Wow Wow.

Around the mirror on the wall were celebrities cut out from magazines, the edges curling – impossibly young Tom Cruise, Molly Ringwald, Robert Downey Jr, Matt Dillon, and Brooke Shields. The bulletin board had playbills, advertisements for musicals, and ticket stubs tacked all over, along with long-faded Polaroids of young people having fun.

Will let his gaze roam the room as Chilton stood nervously beside him. "Can I go in?" Will asked after a long moment.

"Yes," Frederick said, though his word was saturated with hesitancy.

Will went over to the music collection and ran his fingertip over the edges of the cassette tapes in their cases. "What is this?" he asked. "It's like a… time capsule."

"That's almost exactly what it is," Frederick admitted. "When my parents moved into their senior living condo a few years back, we had to clear out the house."

"This was your old bedroom," Will said, feeling a smile tug at his lips. "They kept it the same."

"I brought everything here and…" he sighed helplessly, "recreated it. There. Now you know."

"And you… meditate in here?"

"More or less."

Will paused his finger over a record, and glanced back at Frederick.

"Go ahead."

Will pulled it free from the stack with careful reverence. "I love this one."

Frederick came closer, though warily, as Will turned the album over in his hands to look at the back cover. "You do?"

"Yeah. I think we were, uh, living in Michigan at the time. My dad worked for a guy who had a band in his spare time. I used to, um, go over to the shop after school and he let me listen to his records."

"Playing a record is becoming a lost ritual." Frederick smiled wistfully.

"Put it on," Will suggested, handing it to him. "That thing still works, doesn't it?"

“I had it completely refurbished,” Frederick confirmed.

“So play it. And we can, ah… travel back in time.” Will lowered himself down onto one of the deflated bean bags. He liked the way Frederick smiled as he fired up the turntable and lowered the needle.

*“Ah, watch out*

*You might get what you're after*

*Cool babies*

*Strange but not a stranger*

*I'm an ordinary guy*

*Burning down the house…”*

They listened to the first side of *Speaking in Tongues* just laying on the beanbags and staring at the ceiling. When Frederick got up and flipped the record, Will asked him a question upon his return. “So, what do you think about when you come in here?”

“It helps me realign my priorities,” Frederick said, lacing his hands on his stomach, over his scar, if it were visible at the moment. “I lived in this room as a teenager. I used to lay on the floor just like this and think about what I wanted for my future.”

“Hmm.” Will inched his bean bag closer. “So what was teenage Ricky like?”

“Lonely, but rarely alone. I loved my sisters but I couldn’t exactly… I don’t know. Be myself around them. Definitely not my parents. Theater camp was a godsend.” Frederick let Will brush his hair back over his forehead. “I know your childhood was a thousand times more traumatizing, but being bullied at school does have an effect on a person.”

“I know,” Will said. “It’s not a competition. No prize for being the most fucked up.”

There were always bullies. You were either a bully, a toady, or a victim, and as the new kid, Will had often fallen into the victim pool. However, it usually only took one good punch to the mouth to be left alone and fade into the background where he preferred to be. One time, he’d taken on two high schoolers at once as an 8th grader, and when the school called to inform Beau Graham of Will’s upcoming detention, Beau had offered his son a beer at dinner that night.

“So you’d go to your room to listen to music and think about the future. About getting away?”

Chilton nodded. “Getting away and *thriving* ,” he said. “I loved the theater, but there were no guarantees I would be able to support the lifestyle I wanted.”

“Wouldn’t be enough to just work as an actor – make a living. You’d have to be rich, too.”

“Wealth is the measure of worth, according to my father’s side of the family.”

Will scoffed a gentle laugh as he propped himself up on his elbow to look down at Frederick with a little grin. “And you like nice things.”

Frederick sighed. “And I like nice things.”

“Theater was a no-go. So you got into psychology, which you also enjoyed, though it wasn’t your passion. But it wouldn’t be enough just to be a… practicing psychiatrist. You needed to be the best in the field.” Will’s empathy pulse whirred to life and Chilton’s adolescence and motivations opened up to him like a well-thumbed magazine. “Rising popularity of true crime coupled with the media coverage of high-profile killers like, uhm… Dahmer, Richard Ramirez… got you into criminal psychology. A decade later, you’re, ah… collecting killers in your hospital like…” he gestured to the stereo, “rare LPs and bootleg cassettes.”

“The best revenge is a life well lived,” Frederick confirmed, reaching up to stroke Will’s cheek.

“More like you’ve got a chip on your shoulder,” Will said, though it was gentle. “Wasn’t enough to have the BSHCI, either. You got in with the FBI. You wanted to catch the Chesapeake Ripper. Or maybe you already had him in your hospital.”

Frederick got up with a huffed sigh and took the record off of the turntable, sliding it carefully back into the sleeve. “We hardly need to revisit my mistakes with Abel Gideon. I live with them every day.”

“It’s a little, um… *Macbeth* -y. You and your ambition.”

“I don’t care if we’re not running a production, Will, you cannot say the name of the Scottish Play under my roof,” Chilton chastised him as he set a new record on the player.

*“Yesterday I got so old*

*I felt like I could die*

*Yesterday I got so old*

*It made me want to cry*

*Go on, go on, just walk away*

*Go on, go on, your choice is made*

*Go on, go on, and disappear*

*Go on, go on away from here…”*

“I suppose you’d rather not be Lady Macbeth,” Frederick said, sitting back on the bean bag. “I take it you’ve had enough of following around bloody phantom images and publicly losing your mind.”

“And then some,” Will agreed. “Besides, I wouldn’t tell you to kill the king. I’d tell you to quit talking to weird women and just live your life. You said it yourself – the best revenge is a life well *lived* . You almost died, Frederick. Ever think about that?”

“I think about it every day that I am not allowed to eat prime rib,” Frederick said wistfully, resting one elbow on one knee.

“Abel Gideon could still be alive,” Will argued. “He disappeared. We have no body. Yes, his back was broken, but he might have a friend. They could be plotting right now.”

Frederick made a noise of disbelief. “The Ripper took him, sweetheart – he’s dead.”

“You’re that sure?” Will paused. “What about the Ripper?”

Frederick visibly shivered. “I’d like to leave him well enough alone.”

“So walk away,” Will advised, sitting up as well. “Forget the family pressure and the-the public eye bullshit and just… quit while you’re ahead.”

“And wither away in a condo in Miami or some such?” Frederick scoffed. “My haters would love that.”

“ *I’d* love that,” Will countered. “You somewhere safe, on the beach every day…”

Frederick considered this. “On the beach alone?”

Will smiled. “Depends. Does the condo allow dogs?”

“Certainly not seven of them.”

“Hmm.” Will sighed out through his nose, mouth pressed in a line. “Relationships are about compromise, I guess.”

“I might propose the same challenge to you, Will – could you walk away from Jack and the Ripper and all the FBI has to offer? You were falsely imprisoned and shot. Almost everyone still believes you had something to do with the murders of Abigail Hobbs, Georgia Madchen… You were facing the death penalty. You’re also lucky you escaped with your life.” He raised a sardonic eyebrow. “Why don’t you quit while *you’re* ahead?”

Fury flared in Will’s gut, cutting in like Abel Gideon’s scalpel must have carved out Frederick’s organs. It was accompanied by a sick wave of loss. He couldn’t walk away. Time was measured now in *before* and *after* . It was him against Hannibal Lecter. Or *with* him. Together until the wheels fell off.

Even if Will wanted to leave, he couldn’t. In the core of his being, he didn’t understand life without Hannibal in it, as antagonist or lover.

Will snapped back, “Because my reckoning is about *justice* , not self-aggrandizement. Makes me wonder what you’re willing to do to… to stay *relevant* . How far does it go?”

“I could ask you the same question.” Frederick’s voice was even, but hot with underlying indignation. “Different goals. Same danger. And do I detect a hint of that insufferable martyrdom you like to display?”

They sat in angry silence now, not looking at one another.

*“Go go go*

*Push him away*

*No no no*

*Don't let him stay*

*He gets inside to stare at her*

*The seeping mouth*

*The mouth that knows*

*The secret you*

*Always you*

*A smile to hide the fear away*

*Oh smear this man across the walls*

*Like strawberries and cream*

*It's the only way to be*

*Exactly the same clean room*

*Exactly the same clean bed*

*But I've stayed away too long this time*

*And I've got too big to fit this time…”*

“I guess we’re not going anywhere. Either of us,” Will said as the song ended and the record needle lifted away from the vinyl.

“Is it so awful?” Frederick wanted to know, putting his hand over Will’s where it rested on the shag carpeting.

“No. Awful isn’t the word I would use.” Will’s thumb stole out to stroke Frederick’s a few times in apology. “So… how much sex did you have in your, uh, teenage bedroom?”

“None,” Frederick admitted. “All of my sexual experiences happened at summer camp.”

“No wonder you enjoyed it so much,” Will teased gently, climbing on top of Frederick now where he reclined on the vintage bean bag. “So you never snuck anybody up here when your parents were asleep?”

“No, I’m afraid this room was only home to self-abuse,” Frederick said with a wan smile. “Wait – there was one time. I was, oh, sixteen or so. Grounded and confined to my room, as if that were such a punishment. I believe that was a consequence of me throwing my sister Maria’s brassiere out the window. Long story.”

They paused to chuckle. “My neighbor Donnie Santangelo threw pebbles at my window after dark, then climbed up the trellis to my window.”

“Romantic,” Will said.

“Well, he just wanted to play Nintendo. Though I do remember a moment when he beat a level and we were silently celebrating. He put his hand on my leg like this.” Frederick rested his palm on Will’s thigh, the thumb dangerously close to the center. “I’d always had a feeling I was different – more different than simply warming the bench on the water polo team or not even being nominated for Homecoming Court. It was a moment of awakening. Girls were lovely, but boys were something else entirely.”

“Hmm.” Will slid free of Frederick’s grasp and started unbuckling his belt. “I think Donnie Santangelo missed out on a golden opportunity to suck your dick.”

“Will.” It was his name through a genuine smile, maybe, Will thought, how he’d looked at sixteen before ambition bit him too hard and he vowed to himself never to be weak again.

“You wanna hold the Nintendo controller while I do it?”

“You’re utterly ridiculous, you know that?” Frederick did put his hands over Will’s to stop him a moment. “I will put a record on, though.”

“Go for it.”

Frederick picked out an album and set down the needle, then settled back on the bean bag chair. “You may proceed,” he said, lacing his hands behind his head.

The song began as Will undressed him the rest of the way.

*“I have a picture*

*Pinned to my wall*

*An image of you and of me and we're laughing, we're loving it all*

*But look at our life now*

*All tattered and torn*

*We fuss and we fight and delight in the tears that we cry until dawn…”*

Frederick let out a held breath of sincere pleasure when Will drew his cock in and moved his tongue along the underside, filling out within moments. Will stroked his hand over the scar on Chilton's abdomen, tracing his fingertips along its ridges, then placing his palm protectively over it.

*"Oh, whoa*

*Hold me now, whoa*

*Warm my heart*

*Stay with me*

*Let loving start*

*Let loving start…"*

"Mmm," Frederick managed as his breaths deepened. "You're better every time. Practice makes perfect, I suppose–" He gasped at a sudden touch of teeth, but it mellowed into a noiseless chuckle as he put his fingers in Will's hair.

*"You say I'm a dreamer, we're two of a kind*

*Both of us searching for some perfect world we know we'll never find*

*So perhaps I should leave here*

*Yeah, yeah, and go far away*

*But you know that there's nowhere that I'd rather be*

*than with you here today…"*

# Disorder and Neurosis

Chapter Summary

Will stumbles upon Chilton's big secret.

**Chapter 12: Disorder and Neurosis**

After fooling around on the bean bags, Will left Frederick curled up in the single bed beneath the vintage blanket and sheet where they'd been cuddling and listening to Kate Bush. He'd forgotten his phone upstairs and wasn't comfortable being without it, considering Zoe was still in recovery, though things seemed to be going well.

He found his phone and shoved it in his back pocket, then broke down the box the new garbage disposal came in and put it in the recycling. Thinking about the new disposal and install got him ruminating on the upcoming holiday. Frederick had been generous from the start with flowers, baked goods, little presents, and paying for dinner. Will had racked up quite the credit card bill with his gala plan. He pulled out his wallet and dialed the number on the back of the card to get his balance. He'd reached the limit and hadn't paid any of it off yet.

"Fuck," he muttered. What did one get for one's sort-of-fake boyfriend for Christmas? The man who could buy everything he ever needed, and already had? The obvious answer was some kind of experience, like taking him to see one of the new wave bands he'd discovered Frederick liked. The ones that were still alive and kicking around, that is. He was pretty sure the Cure were still touring.

But that involved money he didn't have. It'd have to be something heartfelt. Maybe something for his desk? Some kind of memento or inside joke?

Will wandered upstairs to Frederick's office and flipped on the light, examining the expanse of his enormous gleaming mahogany desk. Paperweight? Desk calendar? Fuck. Maybe just a picture of the two of them in a nice frame would do it. Something that matched the office decor as best he could.

Will went around the back of the desk to examine it and the surrounding items. The theme seemed to be dark wood and gold – he could work with that.

There was a manila file folder on the desk in front of Frederick's laptop. The subject tab had "New Book" scrawled on it in pencil. Frederick's handwriting.

*I didn't know I was dating a snoop.*

Will almost walked away. But he didn't. It was probably the outline for some new self-help book Frederick was working on, maybe an updated version of the one he published in the '90s ( *One Day My Brain Just Opened Up!* ).

But what if it wasn't? Trust was not Will's strong suit, not anymore.

He opened the file.

There were several glossy mock-ups of a book cover inside, various designs to choose from. The title read *Loving Agent Graham.*

By Dr. Frederick Chilton.

Edited by Winifred J. Lounds.

" *What the fuck* ?" he hissed. "What the actual *fuck* is this?"

He swept the images back into the folder and set it aside, then opened the laptop. Frederick didn't bother to password protect it. The screen came to life, the desktop picture one that they'd taken at the gala under the mistletoe. The sweet image was completely at odds with his sense of all-consuming anxiety, like the bottom was about to drop out of the world. He searched for his name in the files on the hard drive and came up with several word processing documents. He clicked on the one opened most recently.

*Chapter 12*

*He was Special Agent Will Graham no longer. Now he was Patient 282, a man suffering delusions of persecution, hallucinations, lost time, and intermittent seizures.*

*Now he was my patient, and as I began his treatment, I realized things were somehow different between us.*

*Many mental health professionals can relate to the age-old dilemma, and I am no exception – I have had several patients throughout the years that have developed romantic feelings for me during the course of their treatment. This usually occurs after a rapport has been established in the course of therapy. Patients misplace their affection, seeing me as a firm and steady hand guiding them towards a greater understanding of their psyche. Those who are prone to attachment issues often mistake that feeling of security for sexual attraction, one feeling morphing into another.*

*With Will Graham, it was different. The first time I looked into his eyes as they regarded me above the rim of his bite mask, I felt a strange – and at the time, unwelcome – spark crackle through the air. It was clear, before he even said a word, that he was intensely attracted to me, not as his doctor, but as a man.*

*You, dear reader, have seen his picture – you can look at it right now if you turn to page _____. Can you blame me if I was flattered? Of course, I had to put those feelings aside immediately, as they were, at the time, unprofessional. Before me, strapped to a transport cart in a straitjacket, was a man who, according to the available evidence, had brutally murdered five people. And yet I sensed a gentleness in him. He was a wounded bird that I was being forced to put in a cage.*

*That night, after lights out, I heard him crying quietly in his cell at the end of the block…*

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Will couldn't control the volume of his voice and it rang through the empty office. The first night in the BSHCI he'd been completely numb, disassociating, living in the stream in his mind, casting his line over and over again, Abigail wandering in and out of his visions. And as for the "immediate attraction," that was 100% pure bullshit. Until he'd begun playing with Hannibal, and had accidentally gotten to know Frederick, Will had found him irritating, to say the least.

He opened up another file, almost as if he hoped the previous one was a fluke.

*Chapter 23*

*Reader, I have asked you to imagine many things that may be outside of your realm of understanding. The minds of vicious serial killers, the deranged notions of those who have lost touch with reality, the petty behaviors of those who were threatened by my dedication to my work and the accolades that followed.*

*Now, I want you to imagine something entirely different. Imagine me, at home, pouring over an enormous stack of case files, preparing for the next day's work at the Baltimore State Hospital, when my doorbell rings. And standing on my doorstep is Will Graham.*

*It is not Will Graham as I saw him last, with wild hair and hollow eyes, skin sallow from his extended periods of solitary confinement. No, this Will Graham has a fresh haircut, new clothes, and is wearing cologne. Now that I am no longer his therapist, he is here to ask me on a date.*

*I've explained before how Will struggles with social interactions, ranging from prickly behavior to downright antisocial tendencies. Now, he's as nervous as a teenager asking out a prom date, as though he's an awkward freshman and I am the Homecoming Queen. Again, readers, I am struck by the dichotomy of this man – someone so attuned to the minds of killers, so at home with violence and murder, now standing in front of me fairly trembling, like a lost puppy desperate to find a home.*

*How could I refuse? Of course, I remembered the shared glances and energy between us in the hospital. Now that we were free to socialize, I saw no harm in discovering the deep connection that seemed to run between us…*

Consumed by cold fury, Will scanned through the files until he found what he was looking for.

*After trying the delectable empanadas, the thoughtfulness of his gift and the striking existence of his nurturing side conjured in me, yet again, that powerful attraction that could not be ignored.*

*We went upstairs to bed.*

*A gentleman never tells, so alas, I cannot provide details of our satisfying encounter. What was made clear, however, was yet another glaring contradiction in this man, Will Graham, accused multiple murderer and former hunter of killers – he was adorably inexperienced but enthusiastic. I was smitten.*

Will closed the files and the laptop. He sank into the desk chair, leaned his elbows on the glossy mahogany and put his head in his hands.

For a few minutes, his mind was static, pure noise, white as the driven snow. Slowly, thoughts and feelings emerged, clutching and clawing at him in tandem.

It hurt. That was all he was aware of at first. He felt the ache of betrayal. It was a sensation he was intimately familiar with. Hannibal had gained his trust only to frame him for murder while his brain burned.

This was less dire, he told himself. This was just… Chilton being Chilton. Same old Chilton. He shouldn't have been surprised. Once the initial sting to his heart ebbed into an ache, the realist took over. Of course this was how Frederick was going to stay relevant. And Freddie Lounds was the perfect choice for a writing partner. *Tattlecrime* had a ready-made audience that would ensure bestseller status. They stood to make a lot of money, not to mention the talk show and lecture circuit.

The pain he felt had two different sources, the closer he looked at it. First, he had genuinely grown fond of Ricky. It wasn't love, not by a long shot, but as Frederick had opened up to him, Will had been privy to a more layered version of the man. It wouldn't be forever, but it had been nice. Parts of it had made Will feel like a normal person.

And that was where the second source of anguish began. He had felt, for whole days at a time, like he could pretend to be an average guy in a decent relationship. He wasn't lonesome or alienated.

He knew, he *knew* it was fucking hypocritical as hell, but being used had its own sorrow. It made him rethink what he'd done to Frederick in the first place, not that Chilton wasn't making fucking lemonade out of it.

He opened the computer again and did a search for Hannibal's name. It was mentioned in the manuscript when detailing Will's background but Chilton had wisely left his suspicions about

Hannibal's links to the Chesapeake Ripper out of the story. There was also no mention of Will being less than genuine with his affections.

It was very possible that Frederick was too egotistical to think Will was using him for any reason, much less to provoke Hannibal.

And even though the book hurt him, Will wanted to keep it that way.

Regardless of how things played out, it had to end. Now. What happened next, he didn't know. Jack's plan, his tryst with a murderer, any of it. The only certain fact was that he wasn't going to give Frederick and Freddie anything else to write about.

Will picked up one of the cover mock-ups and went back downstairs. He sat on the side of the little bed and looked at Frederick while he slept, mouth open, hands curled against his chest. Sleeping next to somebody was something he would miss, no matter what came with it.

Gently, he shook Frederick awake. "Mmm, hello," Ricky murmured, stretching and running a hand up Will's thigh. "How long was I out?"

"An hour or so." Will pressed his lips together, then bit the bottom one clandestinely on the inner side. He braced himself with a breath and handed Chilton the copy of the book cover. Frederick's eyes went wide with panic and he sat up like a shot.

"What were you doing in my office?" he demanded.

"Doesn't matter now," Will said softly. "I'm gonna go."

He stood up, but Frederick reached out and snagged his sleeve, pulling him back into the bed. "Will," he said. "I'm… I was going to let you read it all first. Before I even sent it to Freddie. To make edits if you wanted. We can work on it together. It's going to be a bestseller. Millions of copies…" he tried a hopeful smile. "That's a lot of dog food and vet visits. We could travel. Do the publicity tour together."

Will slowly pulled himself free from Frederick's grip and stood again, unclenching his fists and forcing himself to breathe, blinking away sudden, unexpected tears. "We're done."

"Will—"

"It's over." Will put his hands in his pockets, looking at the floor before locking gazes with Dr. Chilton again. "There. Now your book has an ending."

He turned and left.

***

"Shitty."

Hannibal shifted in his chair, adjusting his tie. "What is?"

“That’s the answer to the question you’re gonna ask me. ‘Tell me, Will, how was your week?’”

Hannibal cocked his head. “Care to elaborate?”

Will chuckled. It was edged with bitter irony. “To you? No.”

“Perhaps you’d rather discuss the Christmas party?”

“Nope.” Will was too agitated to sit. He got up and paced over to the ladder, running his hand over one of the rungs before squeezing it as hard as he could, just to see his knuckles go white. “Pass on that, too.”

“The weather, then.” The city had been victimized by an ice storm that had left many without power. Even now, Will’s house was running on his emergency generator and he was lucky to get out of his driveway without being killed, as the gravel was nothing but sheer ice.

“How about that ice?” Will asked, facetious, his mouth twisted into a fake smile.

“I’m surprised you aren’t more forthcoming tonight. Surely you want to regale me with tales of your blossoming relationship with Frederick Chilton in an attempt to inflame my jealousy. This in turn will encourage us both to act recklessly.”

Will squeezed the ladder rung again, then turned back to Hannibal. “I broke it off,” he admitted. “And before you make any assumptions, no, it had absolutely nothing to do with you.”

Hannibal didn’t respond right away. The muscle in his jaw twitched. “If it had nothing to do with me, what inspired you?”

“It just… wasn’t working out,” Will said.

“Interesting. You were the picture of happiness. I suppose one can never tell what happens behind closed doors.”

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell,” Will said bitterly, though Hannibal wouldn’t get the reference.

“Indeed.” Hannibal got up and poured two glasses of wine from the bottle sitting on the sideboard, and approached Will slowly, as if to telegraph his good intentions. Will took the offered glass and drank without tasting. “How does the end of the relationship make you feel? And don’t–” Hannibal warned, raising a hand with a pointed index finger as Will opened his mouth, “--ask me how it makes *me* feel before answering for yourself.” He paused. “Please.”

Will groped for words, leaning his hips back on the ladder so he was at a slight angle. “Too many things at once,” he admitted. “I don’t know who to be angry with.”

“The ending of a relationship is rarely in terms of black and white. Our connections to others fail one conversation at a time.”

“A slow motion train wreck,” Will agreed after another sip. “One you can’t help but watch?”

Hannibal nodded, drinking as well, tasting thoughtfully before swallowing. Will watched his throat work with more interest than he probably should have.

“Some relationships end with a clear… good guy and a bad guy,” Will argued. “Though I suppose you’ll say that lacks nuance. But, theoretically, one partner could be a liar. Abusive. Spend the family fortune on stuff from QVC.”

“Is that why your relationship ended?” Hannibal asked, returning to his chair.

Will snorted. “No, I didn’t spend all of Ricky’s money on… shit from the Home Shopping Network.”

“I meant,” Hannibal said patiently, “were you caught in a lie? Or was it the infidelity? If you’re determined to cast hero and villain roles, wouldn’t you be forced to play the part of the proverbial bad guy?”

Will didn’t answer.

“You were the one who was unfaithful,” Hannibal reminded him.

“I told you it wasn’t about you.”

“So you keep saying.” Hannibal set his wine glass to the side and crossed his leg over the other, resting his hands on his lap. “I do wonder if my next line of inquiry is related to the breakup.”

“And what line would that be?” Will finished his wine far too quickly. It burned in his empty stomach.

“Since I am your therapist again, I requested your records from the time in which Dr. Chilton was your sole caretaker. I’ve called the Baltimore State Hospital nearly a dozen times and stopped by in person. I’ve been given several excuses, but either those records have been lost or destroyed, or Dr. Chilton won’t release them to me. Perhaps he’s keeping them for himself. What would he need them for?”

Will shut his eyes for a moment and willed his blood pressure to stay within a normal range. The book. He needed them for the fucking book. “I don’t know,” he lied. “A souvenir?”

“The fact that you don’t know says that he’s hiding something from both of us. Is that why you ended things?”

“You’re assuming it was me that called it off.” Will took his chair again, setting the empty wine glass at his side. Hannibal motioned to it, indicating a refill, but Will shook his head. He needed his wits. Wherever this conversation was going felt dangerous.

“Wasn’t it?”

Will set his mouth into a thin line.

“He was keeping something from you.”

Will inhaled deeply and let the breath out in increments, his hands clutching the chair’s arms. Nodded yes. “He’s… writing a book. About me.”

Hannibal’s expression didn’t change. Either he already knew or he’d suspected. “That would explain why I saw Freddie Lounds’ car in the lot at the hospital the day I came to try and find your paperwork.”

“Yeah. She’s… editing and promoting, I guess.” Will ran his thumbnail over his bottom lip, afraid to look Hannibal in the eyes. He mentally shied away from the questions he sensed like sharks circling. *How does it feel to be manipulated by someone you were manipulating? What will you do now? Would you like to kill him? How would you do it?*

Instead. Hannibal asked, “Did you give him a rare gift, Will?”

Will looked at him now. “Like what?”

Hannibal did not speak, but the tension in the room ratcheted up another notch. Then another. The longer the silence stretched, the more Will’s body was flooded with a deep, oily feeling he couldn’t name, heavy in his limbs.

It was unbearable. At last, it broke him open. “I didn’t let him. It didn’t feel right. That he would be my… first. I don’t know why…”

The little catlike smile that graced Hannibal’s lips made Will’s face burn. “Fuck,” he muttered. “That’s not what you meant. What-what did you mean? What *gift* ?”

“Something you do not see for the treasure it is.”

“I don’t…” Will trailed off, sweat tickling his hairline. “I don’t know what you’re saying. Can’t you – ever make fucking sense?”

“Did you reveal your whole heart to him, Will?”

“My heart…?”

“Your entire self. Every blood-soaked inch of your mind, every shadowy corner illuminated. Does he know, for instance, that you enjoyed killing Garret Jacob Hobbs? That there is a piece of every murder entombed inside you?” Hannibal got to his feet. Will copied the motion after a moment to avoid being trapped in the chair as Hannibal approached him at a slow stalk.

“En-entombed…”

“I would say ‘enshrined’.” Closer. Will backed up, a hand on the chair to steady himself. “Tell me, Will – does he *know you* ? Does he *see you* ?”

Will’s heel hit something solid as he stepped back again – a bookshelf against the wall. Hannibal’s nearness brought a sudden, intoxicating terror and a moment of dreadful clarity.

He shrank back, the shelf pressing into his hips, unable to tear his eyes away from Hannibal's gaze as he came close enough to touch. "I'll ask you again – did you give him such a gift?"

"No," Will breathed. "No, I-I didn't."

"He wouldn't have wanted it," Hannibal said, softly dangerous. "Nor is he worthy."

Will's breath caught as Hannibal invaded his space with his body and his heady scent. "Don't–" he tried, but the word shriveled in his mouth.

"Give it to me, Will." Hannibal's voice was just above a velvet whisper. "I would not only accept, but honor it." Closer. "Worship it for the wonder that it is. That *you are* ." He reached out to touch Will's face. Will edged away as far as he could, breaths coming faster now, heat shrieking across his skin. Hannibal settled for running the backs of his fingers down Will's cheek and along the line of his throat before resting a large, firm palm against it and curling his grip, the other hand sneaking around the small of Will's back.

Will took him by the shoulder and one jacket lapel, but could not bring himself to push Hannibal away or pull him closer, balancing on the edge of a knife, his heart smashing itself to death against the cage of his ribs. Hannibal's pupils were so large his eyes looked flat black, his form backlit into a hulking shadow.

Hannibal bent his neck to speak into Will's ear, the brush of his breath warm against it. "When I said I wanted you, I meant *all of you* ."

The ambient pulse shook free of Will's own control, pouring Hannibal into his brain, directly from the source like he'd tapped into a tree to harvest the sap, dripping like blood into his mind.

*All of you. Every dark thought, every benevolent impulse. All of who you have been, from unwanted child to isolated boy to the man standing before me at this moment.*

*We have tried to live apart and each of us withered. Come back to me.*

*I will nurture you, protect you, but not protect the world from you. No, I will offer it to you on a silver dish. The feast is life. Eat it and live. I will feed it to you one piece at a time from the tips of my fingers and revel in the taste of it on your lips.*

*You do not need to think, to reason, to wrestle with guilt like Jacob locked in combat with the angel. All you need to do is love me, and let me love you.*

It was impossible to know who leaned in first, who closed the greater number of inches between them, who destroyed the little bit of space that marked separation, measured the last remnants of sanity and good sense. Will just knew the kiss, the tenderness of Hannibal's lips on his own before they pivoted into rough deliciousness. He felt crushed by it, a beautiful weight, lungs burning with the last breath of free air.

Ravenous consumption. Hannibal ripped Will's jacket from his shoulders and helped him wiggle free of it, tore open the first few buttons of his shirt and paused the kiss only to yank it

over his head. Will busted the cuff buttons off trying to get the garment away from him as Hannibal's mouth descended again, scoring down his throat with rough presses of lips and the threat of teeth. All this to the litany of heavy breaths and wanton sighs.

Once his hands were free again, though his mouth was occupied by a thick, wet, foreign tongue, Will hooked his shaking fingers in the silk of Hannibal's tie and slid it open until the knot collapsed, then tore open his shirt at the collar, working down along the buttons blindly. He couldn't see them even if his eyes were open; Hannibal had a hand in his hair and was twisting it, forcing him to tilt his head back, exposing his throat for kisses, licks, bites, deep inhales of his scent.

Will blindly managed to get the shirt open and couldn't suppress a moan when their bodies finally touched, even if it was just from navel to neck. Hannibal's body hair, his musculature and his warmth, all of it combined in a hedonistic expanse of skin that took Will's breath away as they at last embraced.

And just like that, he was on his back on the floor with Hannibal on top of him, kissing him like he could never get enough, rutting against him through their remaining clothing. "Will," he panted, and in that one syllable Will felt his power over Hannibal again, the same way he felt knowing he'd infuriated polished, soft spoken Dr. Lecter by dating someone else and rubbing it in his face. He might be the one being held down at the moment, but Hannibal was desperate for him, for their connection.

Will's suspicions were confirmed when Hannibal lifted himself just enough to look down at Will with soft, honeyed eyes, liquid with vulnerability and affection. The moment passed and they went dark with lust as he dipped his mouth down to taste Will's throat again. Will snaked his hands along the small of Hannibal's back and pulled out his shirttails to get a grip on the flesh, feeling the movement of the toned muscles beneath, hands greedy for the sweet curve of his spine, the rounded edges of ribs. Hannibal's lips worked up his neck, rounding the edge of his jaw as he opened Will's pants one handed and reached inside. Will's breath caught in a half-gasp as Hannibal's hand cupped around him, massaging, fingertips pressing further and further back. "God—fuck," Will said, the words escaping through his harsh exhale.

"Should I let you go?" Hannibal asked, voice maddeningly calm as he pressed against Will's perineum with the pads of two fingers, finding the internal rise on the opposite side. "Are you going to leave as soon as the initial moment passes? Abandon me again?"

"No," Will promised. "N-no, no."

"Good." Hannibal sat back on his heels and peeled Will's jeans off, tossing them aside, and holding him down by the chest with one hand, parting his knees with the other. Will panted, craning his neck to watch as the good doctor began a long and intimate devouring of his cock, pausing to apply his tongue in other places all along the cleft of his ass.

It was good. It was mind-erasingly good. It was *paralyzing* . Hannibal swapped out his tongue for his fingers and pressed into Will slowly. Will was in no way prepared for how much different this felt than when Frederick did it. With a doctor's precision and a lover's attention, Hannibal stroked his prostate. Will clamped a hand over Hannibal's free one that

was splayed out on his chest, clutching at it desperately as he trembled and moaned. Hannibal leaned in and fellated him for a few moments even as his finger worked.

And then it happened. From some white hot source erupted the most incredible orgasm he'd ever had in his entire life. And it just went on and on, clutching and cradling different parts of his body until it at last ebbed away on a golden tide. He was left weak and damp everywhere like a sailor washed ashore from a shipwreck.

Hannibal undressed himself enough to get his cock out and lifted Will into his arms, rising them on their knees. Will hung around his neck, clutching his shoulders, resting his face against Hannibal's cheek. Still breathing hard. Hannibal pressed himself between Will's wet thighs and began to thrust, one hand on Will's bare ass, squeezing and kneading the muscle there, the other cradling the back of his head. He shuddered as he came, and Will murmured in appreciation as he felt the warm splash of the release between his legs.

Then they were on the floor, dirty, half dressed, spent and panting, wrapped in an embrace. When Hannibal seemed able to do so, he managed to prop himself up on his elbow to kiss Will with seemingly endless enthusiasm.

"Again?" he asked breathlessly.

Will nodded yes with a smile.

# Quantifiably Bitchy

Chapter Summary

Who will Will choose to run away with?

**Chapter 13: Quantifiably Bitchy**

It'd been a quiet Friday morning in the Graham household. He'd slept in as much as the dogs would allow, then spent extra time making them a big breakfast with some pot roast Hannibal had given him.

It might be human. Might not. Will found that the idea had little bearing on the taste. The dogs ate every scrap. After cleaning up, Will stretched out on his bed and picked up his phone from the bedside table. Nothing. He sighed, a little irritation bleeding into the exhale.

Despite his better judgment, he opened up a text to Hannibal and typed *wyd?*

*Hello, Will. I'm afraid I don't know what that means.*

Will snorted a laugh. *It stands for "what are you doing?"*

*Right now, or in a more holistic sense?*

Will laughed again, rubbing his forehead before dragging a hand through his hair. He should have known Hannibal was going to be impossible to sext. *Both, I guess. Haven't heard from you.*

*I apologize if I kept you waiting. I had many things to attend to over the last two days. One of which was speaking with Alana.*

*Oh really? How did that go?*
*As you might expect,* Hannibal responded. *She was tired of my split attention in any case.*

Will paused, then wrote, *Do I have to wait for my next appointment to see you again?*

*No,* came the immediate reply. *Once I have my affairs in order I will make you dinner. And make up for lost time.*

*Any chance of a sexy picture to tide me over?*

*I'm afraid I'm in the middle of something at the moment. A surprise for you. I'll call you later.*

Will sighed again, dropping the phone on his chest.

Just then, he heard the dogs take up a chorus of barks. Somebody was coming up the driveway. Will tossed his phone on the bed and got up, glancing out the front windows. His heart sank. Chilton's outlandish convertible was struggling through the sludgy snow, tires spinning against the frozen gravel. "What the fuck do you want," Will muttered under his breath as he shrugged on his coat and slipped into his boots.

He stepped out on the porch and caught a full view of Frederick as he got out of the car and hustled up to the house. He was splattered in blood, eyes wide, face pale and mouth drawn down in horror. "Shit," Will said, meeting him at the bottom of the stairs. "Frederick, what the hell happened? Are you hurt?"

"N-no," Chilton managed. He was quaking all over as he fell against Will, hands clawing at his coat. "It's not my blood."

*I'm in the middle of something at the moment. A surprise for you.*

"Oh shit," Will breathed.

"May I use your shower, please?"

"Come inside," Will suggested, taking him by the arm. One command and the dogs disbanded, racing off into the yard to play and get covered with mud and snow, but that was a problem for another time. Chilton broke out of Will's grip and headed straight for the bathroom. It was only then Will realized he was carrying a suitcase that he dropped on the floor of the living room first.

Frederick, visibly shaking, began to remove the bloody clothing.

"Are you sure – what – before you destroy evidence, tell me what happened."

Chilton ignored the suggestion about the evidence, but he spoke as he worked, peeling himself free of his soiled suit, telling Will a broken tale of woe – finding Abel Gideon in the wine cellar, dead and limbless, being chloroformed by Hannibal, waking up to the horror of the two dead FBI agents, daubed in their blood with the murder weapon in his hand.

"Let me guess," Will murmured, watching Frederick reach into his shower/tub and turn on the water. "Your bags were already packed."

Frederick's head shot up from where he was examining Will's shampoo bottle's ingredients. Well, shampoo, conditioner, body wash in one. "How did you know…?"
"It's a very Hannibal Fucking Lecter thing to do," Will answered as Chilton stepped into the shower, not bothering to close the curtain. He squirted some 3-in-1 in his hand and rubbed it on his hands and neck. "It also means that he wants you to run. He wants you to do exactly

what you're doing right now – destroying evidence. Looking guilty as… as *all-get-out*, Frederick. You're playing right into his hand."

"Think about the scene I just described to you." Hot water was bringing Chilton back to his sassy self. "All you did was throw up an ear! No, I'm done for. I have to leave. Towel, please."

Will handed him one as he turned off the water and stepped out. "You missed a spot." Will picked up a washcloth and dragged it over the back of Frederick's neck.

Frederick's resolve seemed to crumble at the sudden intimate action and he clung to Will in a terrified, desperate embrace, water from the shower soaking into Will's shirt. "It was the most horrible thing I ever saw," he said, his body trembling in Will's arms. "The smell alone, all that blood – looking at a crime scene photo is one thing but – this was my *home* ."

"I'm sorry, Ricky," Will said softly, holding him tighter. "This… is…" *my fault,* he wanted to say, but didn't see the point. "You shouldn't run. You're just playing his game. He put the suitcases there to make you feel like you had no other choice. You're gonna get yourself killed, you understand me?"

"I can't go to prison." Frederick stepped away from Will, wrapping the towel around his waist and brushing past him to open his suitcase. "And I certainly cannot be an inmate in my own facility. Can you imagine? The irony would be fatal." He pulled out some clothes and started getting dressed.

Will mentally stepped back to admire Hannibal's plan. It was ingenious, of course. If Chilton died in a police chase, all the better. The Chesapeake Ripper would be dead, leaving Will and Hannibal free of any scrutiny.

But as he watched Ricky go back to the bathroom to style his hair of all things in this moment, he just couldn't. Couldn't let it play out that way. Couldn't bury another friend, even if Frederick had been lying to him about the book. He knew some of their moments had been genuine the same way he knew a killer's design.

Will made an excuse about letting the dogs in and stepped out to the porch. He sent Jack a clandestine text, then went back in. Ricky was tying his shoes.

"Don't do this." When Frederick stood up from the chair, Will was there, resting a hand on his shoulder, fingers brushing his neck. "You're not a killer, Frederick. Every cop for a hundred miles is gonna be looking for that car of yours."

"You're right. Maybe I should take the Volvo." Frederick paused, looking into Will's eyes. He stepped closer and slipped his arms around Will's waist. "Maybe *we* should take the Volvo."

"Frederick…"

Chilton pressed in close and kissed him, a desperate hand in his hair. Will allowed it, eventually returning it. "Run with me, Will," Frederick pleaded. "We can drive straight

through to Florida if we take turns at the wheel. Then Cuba! I can contact some of my cousins. They'll help us — you can pilot a boat, of course…"

"Frederick…" Will sighed, leaning their foreheads together. "I can't."

"Of course you can! Pile the dogs in the car if you must. What is there for you here?"

Will scoffed quietly. "You think my life's over now because you're leaving?" *It's just beginning.* Hannibal's voice in his head, just like his internal monologue at the BSHCI.

"There's no book in Cuba. No Jack Crawford, no Chesapeake Ripper."

"We've been over this. I can't walk away." Despite his words, Will backed Frederick up to the edge of the bed, giving him a little push to make him sit. "So let's say goodbye. A… nice farewell, if you insist on leaving."

"I should get on the road…" Frederick's protests dried up when Will climbed on him and kissed him, messing with the clothes he'd just put on, ruining the careful style of his still drying hair. "I suppose…" he panted as Will touched him through his pants, rubbing him with tender but insistent force while kissing his neck, "…a blowjob for the road wouldn't hurt anything." He stopped Will, holding his head between his hands, taking a moment to lock eyes and stroke his hair. "I really did have… *feelings* for you, you know," he said, and Will nodded. "I like you more than you probably realize, or care to realize at this point."

"I know," Will said with a little crooked smile. "Same here. But there were things you liked more." *Same here.*

"I'll miss you," Frederick admitted as Will pushed up his shirt and kissed his stomach scar. "I'll think of you whenever I listen to the Talking Heads." He sighed again. "Speaking of *head* . And less talking."

Will laughed, an incredulous scoff. Same old Chilton. Well, one for the road, then.

Frederick was just pulling him into a grateful embrace when the door to Will's house burst open and Jack Crawford appeared with his gun drawn, Zeller and Price flanking him. "Don't break the fucking door!" Will called to the SWAT guys that were probably storming in the back as he spoke.

"You called them?" Frederick mewled, sitting up and slowly putting his hands behind his head, pants still open.

"I called them," Will confirmed, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. "I told you, you were gonna get yourself killed. I'm out of room for blood on my hands, Frederick."

"Put your pants on, man." Jack and Zeller averted their eyes, but Jimmy looked on with a barely-contained grin as Frederick zipped up with a heavy sigh.

"Would you do me one final favor and call my lawyer?" he asked Will, giving him a cold sidelong glance.

“Sure. Remember not to say anything until you have representation,” Will reminded him. “I’ll, ah… check in on you, okay?”

Jack pulled Frederick’s arms behind his back and cuffed him. “Cuba, Will,” he called over his shoulder as Jack forced him out the door. “The beach. Like you said. But that’s not what you wanted. Not really.”

The screen door banged, leaving Will alone with Zeller and Price.

Zeller looked at the rumpled bed covers, then at Will. “Jeez, aiding and abetting much?”

“I was keeping him here so he didn’t run,” Will said, clipped and blunt, hands balled up in his pockets as he stared daggers at Zeller.

“Heh. More like aiding and *a-bedding* , am I right?” Price quipped, holding up his hand to Z for a high-five. “Up top!” Z just shook his head and went outside. “Oh, Will, I’m sorry, I stepped in some doggie doo and tracked it in.” Price pointed to a smear on the floor. “That was my bad.”

“Happens all the time.”

Price stood awkwardly for a moment, then just walked out.

Will cleaned up the floor while the cavalcade of FBI drove away with Chilton cuffed in the backseat like a common perp. Once they were gone, Will took care of the dogs, arranged for Karla to stop by in the evening and let them out again, and then got in the car and drove towards Baltimore.

***

I am in my bathrobe, standing in my walk-in shower rinsing the last of the blood from the plastic suit I wear to protect my clothing whilst I murder. It’s been a productive day; I saw a few patients in the morning, visited the market, made a marinade and sharpened my knives, then went to Alana’s house for one last sexual tryst. I drugged her so that she would sleep a few hours while I took care of the FBI agents and Dr. Chilton, then woke not long after I returned to feign my own post-coital nap.

Then I ended our affair. She was cold, her tongue edged as she told me in no uncertain terms that I was obsessed with Will Graham, that our relationship was unhealthy and unethical, and that she ought to report me to the state medical board. I’m unconcerned. If she becomes enough of a nuisance, I’ll find some time in my schedule to kill her.

I am humming Bach and rinsing the suit, which makes a loud rushing sound as the water hits the plastic. I sprayed it with a cleaning solution as well, which is likely why I don’t smell Will as he approaches, much less hear his footsteps.

“Dr. Lecter,” he greets. I turn and find him leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed, watching me as I work. “Destroying evidence? There’s a lot of that going around.”

“Tidying up,” I say with a smile. He must have broken in. Clever boy. I step out of the shower and lay the plastic suit across the bathtub to dry, then turn back to him. His coat is off. I can see it hanging on the edge of the bench I keep at the end of the bed, a deliberate sign, perhaps, that he intends to stay awhile.

“It all came together, didn’t it?” Will approaches me now with confident steps, his crooked smile self-assured. “Abel Gideon stashed in the basement. The FBI agents. Staging the scene like that. Leaving the luggage out, that was a nice touch.”

“I’m pleased that I’ve pleased you,” I say, squaring my shoulders and lifting my chin. I *am* proud of my work.

Will reaches out and runs his fingers along the lapel of my bathrobe, then plays with the tie as if he’ll tease the knot open at any second. “I need to deal with you and my feelings about you,” he says. “I think it’s best that I do that directly. And I think you should grant me the same courtesy.”

“Of course,” I agree. Anything for him.

“So let’s be direct. I know what you did to Frederick and why you did it. You wanted him to suffer, maybe even die for daring to write that book.”

“Yes,” I say. I don’t touch him, not yet. I’m curious what will happen next.

“He was… opportunistic,” Will relents. “But so was I. This all happened because I was trying to…” He sighs, as if he doesn’t want to admit it. “One day in session I sensed it. T-the, uhm… sexual attraction. And I thought it would bother you enough – me being with him – that you’d make a mistake. And we could put the Chesapeake Ripper away for good.”

“Interesting.” I can’t help it. One of my hands, of its own accord, spreads along his hip, rounding to catch a handful of his buttocks. “But the reason for your exploitative relationship changed over time, did it not? You forgot all about the murders, darling. You wanted to infuriate me because it aroused a sexual fantasy you didn’t know you had.”

Will pauses. Then he nods, cheeks blooming pink, his eyes anywhere but on my face.

“It’s hardly anything to be ashamed of,” I comfort him, my other hand resting on the side of his face now. “It’s not, say, *feet* .”

Will chuckles. His smile as he meets my eye is a treasure. “What, is that, uh, one of yours?”

“You’ll have to discover that along the way,” I tease, thumbing his stubble.

“Point is – uhm –” Will is distracted now because I am stroking the curl of his ear. “The point is that everybody *got used* . Nobody’s got a clean slate. And I don’t – I don’t want him to die. And I don’t want him to be locked up for the rest of his life. I know he’s… *Chilton*... but I’m asking you… to find a way to have him let go. After a while.” He grins suddenly. “Let him marinate for a couple weeks on the inside. Might help him gain some perspective.”

I consider. “Your compassion for him is inconvenient, Will.”

“Hannibal,” is all he says in return.

As if I could ever say no to him. But he doesn’t know that yet. “Say please,” I request, my lips hovering over his.

“I need you, Hannibal. Please,” he breathes into my mouth before I use it to devour him for several long, satisfying moments, our hands roaming, pulling, desperate, delicious.

*And I need you. I need you to love me.*

At last, I pull back. “You’ll need to call Jack right away,” I say. “Dr. Chilton cannot come anywhere near Miriam Lass.”

“Why’s that?” Will answers his own question. “Psychic driving. For the years you had her. What did you program her to do?”

“She thinks Frederick is the Chesapeake Ripper. She has instructions to try and kill him on sight.”

“Oh shit.” Will backs away from me. “All right, I’ll call him right now.”

“I’ll find a way to take her off the chessboard,” I assure him. “But for now, she can’t come into contact with our dear Frederick.”

He nods and steps back into the bedroom, retrieving his phone from his coat pocket and dialing. Resuming my song, I hum to myself as I dry off the plastic suit with a microfiber towel. It will have water spots otherwise.

Will is still speaking with Jack when I return to the bedroom. “Don’t ask me how I know, just… I know. The same way I know a killer’s design. I know that Miriam Lass has been influenced by psychic driving, and you can’t let her close to Frederick, not even to ID him. Just… promise me, okay? I’ll have more for you later. I gotta go. Okay.” He hangs up and tosses the phone on the bench next to his coat. As he turns, I catch him in my arms. He goes rigid with surprise for a moment, then relaxes into my embrace, hands on my shoulders as I pull him closer.

“Is our dear Frederick safe?”

“For now.” He leans in to kiss me. “Thank you. For… indulging me, I guess.”

“You’re very sentimental, Will.” I kiss his neck, gentle at first, then with greedier and greedier movements. He murmurs his approval, clutching at the thin fabric of my robe and twisting it in his grip as I close the last space between us.

Then I stop. Pull back. “You smell like him.”

“Yeah?” He leans in and presses his face into my neck for a moment. “Well, you smell like *her* .”

“You must have given poor Frederick a sweet goodbye.” I cannot stop the words from ringing with a cadence of covetousness. “With your mouth.”

“Had to keep him busy until the FBI arrived,” Will explains archly.

“With your mouth,” I repeat.

“Hmm.” He dares to smile.

I catch his chin and hold it, even as he tries to edge out of my grip. “Whore,” I say, barely above a whisper.

And just like that, his pupils dilate and the color on his face blooms once more. I am the composer and the conductor of his palpitating heart and the little catches in his breathing.

“Will Graham. Fisher of men. Not above using yourself as bait.” I push him onto the bed and he only makes a halfhearted show of resistance. “Take your clothes off.” My voice does not give him the option to refuse, and he fumbles with his cuffs while I roughly remove everything from the waist down. He is already swollen with want for me. All because of one little word. “Wash that smell off of you.”

He cocks his head and dares a smile before pulling his shirt over his head. “Only if you come in with me.”

“I’ll consider it.” What I should do is bend him over my knees and give him the spanking of his life, but that particular fantasy is for another time, I think. My arm muscles are a little sore from all the murdering today.

He obeys me, tossing another infuriatingly coy look over his shoulder before stepping into the washroom and turning on the shower. I pause for a moment to open my bedside drawer and make sure we have easy access to some necessary items. I linger in front of the mirror and straighten my hair, give myself a brief glance at my own backside encased in the silk of the robe, and then slide it off, letting it fall in a silky pile next to Will’s jacket.

I find Will standing beneath the cascade of water and allow myself a moment to drink him in. This is the first time I’ve seen him entirely nude *and* soaking wet and my reaction is similar, I think, to what Michelangelo must have felt after the final brush stroke of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the kind of victory shared by the men who stole St. Mark’s body from Byzantium to smuggle back to Venice. His hair is black with moisture, so dark against his skin even as it pinkens in the warm water. I make constellations from the freckles on the back of his neck and use them as a zodiac to read our fortunes.

*I love him.*

And even immediately following this realization of adoration, I will treat him like a slut, because it entices him. The contrast invigorates my arousal as well. Madonna, whore.

He arches his back and runs a hand through his hair, shaking his head. Droplets fly from his curls like momentary diamonds. I pause to admire the way water drips from the point of his

chin as he turns in profile to see me standing behind him.

“That didn’t take long,” he says over his shoulder. The curve of his back is enough to make me question my sanity.

“I’ve waited long enough to have you,” I counter, stepping into the shower and edging up behind him, letting the water soak me as well. He hums, turning back around, and I envelop him in my arms, pressing myself against him, my stiffening cock resting comfortably against the cleft created by his gluteus. I can’t help but kiss along his neck and across the line of his shoulders, the same way I am powerless to stop myself from grinding against him like this, my breathing becoming increasingly disordered.

He acts like he isn’t aware of me, grabbing the sea sponge and squirting some body wash onto it, dragging it along his mostly-hairless chest. I pause to enjoy the lather dripping over his nipples and along the valley of his sternum.

I take the sponge from him now and press it between his legs from behind, giving him a sensual but thorough cleaning. I want him to feel confident in every inch of himself.

He turns in my arms when I’ve finished, and washes me in turn, soaping me from neck to testicles and behind. “You don’t smell like her anymore,” he says.

I reach past him and turn off the water, then hand him a towel. We step back into the bedroom, only half-dry, still dripping. He runs the towel against his hair and I am easily able to grapple him when his attention is diverted in doing so. I spill him onto my bed, then stand and watch as he stretches out, folding an arm behind his head, reaching down not to touch himself, but teasing me by caressing the sweet place below his navel.

I join him on the bed and kiss that place, follow the polaris of his lips further up his chest until I reach them. Breach his lips, invade with my tongue. “I want the taste of him out of your mouth,” I growl. He edges his lips away from mine with a cruel little smile that says, *fine, if you don’t want it.* Whore.

All those laps I swam aid me as I kneel over him now, sitting on his chest but holding some of my weight back so as not to prevent his breathing. “Open,” I order as he strokes up the tensed muscles of my thighs with warm, appreciative hands. Will parts his petal lips and devours my cock. I go deep. I do not make it easy for him, and he takes it, looking up at me, caressing every bit of skin he can reach beneath me while keeping his mouth engaged. When he looks right at me, and we connect through the mutual gaze of longing and hedonism, I climax.

Perhaps I should be grateful to Dr. Chilton for teaching him to swallow so beautifully, as if there was nothing there at all. “You’ve been practicing.” I am equal parts appreciative and infuriated that it was not I who taught him.

There is still one more thing I could teach him.

He is suffering in the intensity of his arousal but I make him wait, lubricating my fingers and his entrance liberally before beginning the slow, erotic work. I had to spend once before this

or I wouldn't have the patience to ensure his pleasure and minimize the discomfort.

He is sweating, making blissful little noises as I finger him, but once I add the third digit he understands what is happening. I see the flicker of worry pass along his features. I pause my treatment and climb up to kiss him with firm reassurance. He nods, mouth curling at the edge with eager nervousness.

I pause for prophylactics. "I don't know where you've been, Will," I tease him, and he glows with pleasured shame.

His response: "Likewise."

To appease his desire for degradation I could penetrate him from behind, force his head down against the bed, pull his hair and murmur a torrent of filthy words. But there will be time for that later. Face to face is best for this moment. Now, as I claim his virginity, I am tender, kissing his mouth, his comely throat, drowning in him in every way, with no interest in being saved. He rests his heels on the rise of pelvic bone at the base of my back as I begin to move, small rocking motions at first.

I know almost immediately that I am at the right angle and increase my strength and speed. What a blessing it would be to make him orgasm purely from my cock inside of him. Oh capricious God, let it be so. I briefly reposition, lifting one of his legs over my crooked elbow. He has his eyes closed, mouth open. I watch his every expression and respond accordingly.

And my prayer is answered. He emits a moan so deliciously loud it echoes through my bedroom, clenching every muscle in his body, rigid with the pleasure that must be coursing through him. This internal grip makes me lose my fragile hold on my composure and I orgasm. I feel it on what I assume is a spiritual level, since God intervened in my favor.

He gives me panted kisses, delirious in the afterglow. I hold him against my chest and he places his ear over my heart, a leg slung over mine. We are like this for a long time, breathing and breathing, our sweat and fluids slowly drying on us. I would be happy to remain, but am forced to get up and deal with the condom. When I return Will is under the covers, his dark hair tumbling against my ivory pillowcase.

'Making yourself right at home?"

He murmurs in assent, reaching for me as I join him. I hold him to me, a sense of complete satisfaction cocooning us with the same warmth and weight as my goose down duvet that I've tucked around us. His hair is still a little damp from the shower and the perspiration of lovemaking. It smells clean and good, like comfort. Shelter from the storm. I know Will feels similarly as he snuggles in, pulling my arms around him so I envelop him from behind.

"When Frederick came to you today," I ask, "did he ask you to run with him?"

Will laughs softly. I can feel that little sound all through his body as I cradle it. "Yeah. Cuba. He has cousins there."

“Hmm.” I stroke his hair behind his ear in a familiar rhythm. Then, before I can stop myself, “Run with me instead.”

“What are we running from?”

“Jack’s not a stupid man. And you’ve insisted on keeping Dr. Chilton alive. He’ll say anything to free himself, even if it means imprisoning one or both of us. Despite your previous associations.”

Will sighs. “Yeah, I know he will.”

“We have some time to plan.” I pause, my heart aching in the space of silence that follows.

He turns in my arms and kisses me. “Where do you think we should go?”

It is close enough to an agreement to flee with me that I feel myself relax. “If we leave soon, we may be able to enter a foreign country legally, and disappear after that. I’ll see to the arrangements. If you tell me where you’d like to go.”

“Never thought about it. Not Cuba, though. I don’t need to run into Frederick’s family.”

I stroke his cheek, enjoying the gentle sound of fingers on stubble. “Italy?”

“Hmm.” He considers. “Do we have time to buy a boat? I want… my dogs.”

“Yes, there’s time.” Warmth blooms in my chest as he kisses me, stroking my hair in turn. “I can see it now. A vineyard in Tuscany, with many acres for them to explore. Somewhere near a train station with a direct route to Florence.”

“And we’ll, what…? Make wine…?” His sea-jewel eyes glimmer at me.

“Yes,” I say, pulling him back into my arms. “And mayhem. And love.”

“Guess I better start practicing Italian,” Will says softly before we drop into sleep.

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